

“Confronting the Unknown Within.” In Robert Hobbs and Joanne Kuebler. *Richard Pousette-Dart*. Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art in cooperation with Indiana University Press, 1990; pp. 80-153.

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# Confronting the Unknown Within

Robert Hobbs

Richard Pousette-Dart's art testifies to the fecundity of the unconscious mind. A founding member of the New York School that came into being in the 1940s and was generally known as Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, Pousette-Dart has evolved a complex imagery of unicellular life, religious symbols, and overlapping skeins of color to suggest the dense interconnected web of forms and ideas that lie beyond the threshold of consciousness. While he shares with his fellow Abstract Expressionists an interest in human values and spiritual truths, he goes far beyond most other painters of his generation in emphasizing creation as a primal act of self-definition. For over half a century he has worked to "express the spiritual nature of the universe"<sup>1</sup> by getting people "onto the thread of their own creative being."<sup>2</sup>

For Pousette-Dart creation is being; it is an active process of acknowledging the power of preformulative thought, the seemingly chaotic images appearing in dreams, and the shadows lurking in the recesses of the mind. His idea of creation differs from the standard Western definition, which has received its most cogent treatment in Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam*, part of the Old Testament cycle decorating the Sistine Ceiling. In this work Michelangelo painted the creation of the human soul as the divine spark of inspiration given to an existing Adam. This Renaissance conception develops out of Michelangelo's early association with Florentine neoplatonists. His characterization of Adam, consequently, indicates a belief in a timeless realm of universal ideas that antedates even the God of the Old Testament, as is evidenced by Adam's heroic, classically-inspired anatomy, which pre-exists the gift of the soul. Michelangelo's view of creation has been highly regarded in Western culture for its clarity and for the significant role given to his monumental, idealized image of the first man; however, it does not concern itself with the aspect of creativity important to Pousette-Dart, who wishes people to confront the unknown within. Only the scene in Michelangelo's ceiling depicting the separation of light from darkness approaches Pousette-Dart's interest in exploring darkness and finding in it the relationship that unites all elements making up the life forces. In his art, then, the ideal state is to "go far enough to come into the universe of everything where nothing is separable."<sup>3</sup>

In his largely abstract paintings Pousette-Dart presents an image of creative growth that involves relinquishing a secure and static identity in order

to enter a preformulative realm full of possibilities but without a predictable outcome. In 1937-38 he defined painting as "that which cannot be preconceived,"<sup>4</sup> and in subsequent notes and lectures he referred to the potential of chaos as a necessary route to creation. Early in his career he marveled that "out of the rich enmesh of chaos unfolds great order and beauty, suggesting utter simplicity is this labyrinth of all possible truths."<sup>5</sup> He repeatedly questioned the wisdom of bracketing aspects of life by imprisoning them in static artistic forms. "The frames are all futile," he wrote, "to close any life away from the inevitable change and dissolve of going ceaselessly on in new birth."<sup>6</sup> His subject is the potential to change, and change is communicated in his art by overlapping and fragmented forms. "Come disarrange things," he wrote, "so things may more properly rearrange, let nothing be fixed . . . for all insists upon movement and change even death yes even death to the living and living to the dead."<sup>7</sup> Although this reference to life and death might seem at first melodramatic, it actually refers to the symbolic death and rebirth of creation: one must die to old forms and cast off the constraints of ego in order to be immersed in the chaos that leads to new discoveries. In a talk at The School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1951, Pousette-Dart described this process of discovery in ecstatic terms:

*Art for me is the heavens forever opening up, like asymmetrical, unpredictable spontaneous kaleidoscopes. It is magic, it is joy, it is gardens of surprise and miracle. It is energy, impulse. It is question and answer. It is transcendental reason. It is total in its spirit. . . . It is a doorway to liberation. It is a spark from an invisible central fire. . . . Painting must have form but not necessarily in any preconceived or set known way.<sup>8</sup>*

Recently he confirmed the importance that a completely open-ended attitude still has for his art when he said, "the highest knowing is unknowing."<sup>9</sup>

Pousette-Dart's understanding of creation, although compatible with Genesis, relies on Eastern and tribal concepts of creation, which the newly developed fields of psychology and comparative mythology began to examine early in this century. According to the comparative mythologist Mircea Eliade, who describes this concept in both the East and the South Pacific in his essay "The Symbolism

Pousette-Dart seeds his paintings and brasses with cultural symbols from ancient art, tribal culture, and religion to connote a universal realm.

Whorl or swirl  
*Radiance*, 1973-74



Spiral  
*Composition Number 1*, 1943



Letters  
*Untitled (Ricardo)*, 1946-48



Hieroglyphs  
*The Magnificent*, 1950-51



Abstract calligraphy  
*Figure*, 1944-45



of Shadows in Archaic Religions,” the initiation into the unformed world of chaos or shadows is recognized as a necessary prelude to growth:

*Shadows symbolize the Cosmic Night, the undifferentiated totality, the unformed, the secret. From one perspective, shadows are homologizable with Chaos, since no form is discernible, no structure is disengaged; this is the modality of the pre-formed. Shadows symbolize at the same time that which is before manifestation of forms and after their disappearance, when the forms are reintegrated into the primordial mass. This is why the cosmological symbolism of shadows approximates that of the Waters. The Waters also express the undifferentiated, the pre-formed, the unmanifested. The act of manifestation is signified by the emergence from the Waters, the exemplary image of Creation is the island or the lotus which rises about the waves.*<sup>10</sup>

Although Eliade accepts the image of “the emergence of Light out of Shadows” as symbolic of “the creation of the Universe as well as the beginnings of History,” he also emphasizes the positive value of Shadows, the potential latent in “the totality, the fusion of all forms.”<sup>11</sup> Initiations may be viewed as a symbolic death, a descent into Hell, a merging with the cosmic night, and enclosure in the proverbial monster’s belly. The release from this frightening, albeit fecund, situation signals a “passage from ‘chaos’ to ‘creation.’”<sup>12</sup> Eliade concludes his summary of this mythological descent into the unformed by reminding readers of its pervasiveness:

*But we know that, for archaic and traditional cultures, the symbolic return to Chaos is indispensable to all new creation, whatever the level of manifestation, every new sowing, or every new harvest is preceded by a collective orgy which symbolizes the reintegration of “precosmogonic Night,” of total “confusion”; every New Year is comprised of a series of ceremonies which signify the reiteration of the primordial Chaos and of the cosmogony. But the same symbolism can be deciphered in the “madness” of future shamans, in their “psychic chaos,” in shadows where they have strayed: this is the sign that profane man is in the process of “dissolution” and that a new personality is being born.*<sup>13</sup>

According to Eliade, creation goes far beyond artistic spheres to embrace the everyday lives of individuals coping with new seasons, years, stages of life, and spiritual attitudes. And, although it is not

negative, entering the primordial broth of chaos can be an intimidating and perhaps even harrowing experience for someone who is not prepared to sacrifice ego in the interests of growth.

In his art Poussette-Dart presents a realm of shadows, heavily seeded with cultural and biological fragments, to encourage viewers to begin their own initiations, to confront the “psychic chaos,” and finally to understand its special beauties. “Everyman,” this artist has observed, “finds himself, in parts composes his real self, in little symbols, over the period of his allotted time, he is the sum of these bright absolutes.”<sup>14</sup> Writing in May 1940, Poussette-Dart proclaims the need for observers to complete the work of art by using it as a route to personal discoveries:

*Great art leaves half of the  
Creation to the onlooker—Gives  
the key to a creative experience  
Draws the spectator into infinite mysteries.*<sup>15</sup>

That same year he substantiated this idea when he proposed that “painting is not what the eye sees but what the second and inner light of feeling knows.”<sup>16</sup> And a decade later he concluded that “to see paintings we must recreate them.”<sup>17</sup>

While viewers must recreate Poussette-Dart’s works by making them relevant to their own lives, this artist must continually reenact the initial steps of creation. He must constantly challenge himself by pushing his art and symbolically himself to the brink of unrecognizability, and he must never allow painting to become static, because stasis cuts off the challenges of creation and becomes mere artistic production: the replication and manufacturing of art. Poussette-Dart imposed on himself this heroic and difficult goal when he announced early in his career: “Let me flow, affect things, and dissolve, to be, and be no more, and be forever. For such is to be one, in accord, with nature. For nature, is that which I am, I shall be.”<sup>18</sup> He has continued to subscribe to this understanding of the creative process, which in a notebook of the 1970s he viewed as “forever growing/forever being reborn/ no one can ever truly tell about this concept except by being it.”<sup>19</sup>



El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos), *Laocöon*, 1610–14. Oil on canvas, 54½ x 67½ inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. Samuel H. Kress Collection.

This necessity to enact the formative stage of creation by confronting chaos and the unknown anticipates by more than a decade Harold Rosenberg's famous article "The American Action Painters,"<sup>20</sup> which joins the French existential imperative to make personal commitments in an absurd, meaningless world to the gestural branch of Abstract Expressionism. In contrast to Rosenberg's desire for resolution through commitment, an understandable attitude for a politically engaged critic during the Cold War, Pousette-Dart's interest in action is a necessary consequence of his philosophical and spiritual understanding of life as the ceaseless ebb and flow of time:

*I do not speak of that which means today not tomorrow but only that which means always everything means change eternity & ceaseless infinite change everything means everything else*<sup>21</sup>

In his quest for a higher reality, the artist condemns himself to almost endless creation: he paints images which he then covers up, and he evolves compositions which are then cancelled out.<sup>22</sup>

Pousette-Dart recognized the need to confirm, repeat, and then reassert again and again the ritual of ceaseless flux and eternal chaos in his paintings. He anticipated his own artistic advances as well as those of his fellow Abstract Expressionists when he wrote in "Painting the Nothingness" (ca. 1940):

*everything must be painted over and then over endlessly there is no finish to realization the only completion means renewal in greater unknowns eternal beginning again as the morning all over things are as false shape, they must be put back into flow, zeroing everything must die toward the river Rivering all life into its flow to the sea things do not mean it is we who mean we must see and we must go through it beyond all forever.*<sup>23</sup>

Here, in essence, is the basis of his drive to create and then create again, thus evoking images of a primordial chaos and an almost endless possibility. The result is works that sometimes contain as many as twenty or thirty layers and have surfaces so thick that they become painted relief sculptures. And here also is a basis for Abstract Expressionism's continued exploration of the richness and allusiveness of the subconscious or unconscious mind.

Pousette-Dart invokes the idea of chaos and the unknown in a series of veiled images that provoke and tantalize viewers while frustrating their attempts

to make all the forms in a particular work completely intelligible. This artist complicates his imagery by conflating a number of sign systems referring to aspects of biology, geometry, religion, and writing. His paintings frequently join fragments of birds and fish with the unicellular creatures amoeba, flagella, and paramecia. These forms in turn interact with whorls, spirals, Greek and Latin crosses, Stars of David, letters, hieroglyphs, abstract calligraphy, and shapes resembling ancient blades to communicate the far-ranging types of images that exist beyond the threshold of consciousness. In addition, Pousette-Dart alludes to a range of spiritually encoded artistic forms that include stained glass, mosaics, and the expressive painterliness of El Greco, Vincent van Gogh, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Wassily Kandinsky. He, for example, transformed the cataclysmic qualities of van Gogh's *Starry Night*, 1889, into struggling biomorphic forms in *Untitled*, ca. 1945 (48).

This multiplicity in part reflects a lifelong interest in collecting mechanical gadgets, natural objects, tribal art, and antiques. As a teenager, Pousette-Dart was fascinated with the steam engine in Valhalla, New York, where he grew up, as well as with automobiles and such gadgets as radios, telescopes, lenses, and old cameras; he even made a pin-hole camera capable of taking half-day exposures. His visits during those years to the American Museum of Natural History inspired him to collect rocks and shells, make bows and arrows, study American Indian art, and speculate about the magic of life. This range of interests is still apparent today in his home and studio. He shares with his wife Evelyn a penchant for collecting a broad assortment of materials. Their house in Suffern, New York, is a virtual treasure trove of collections that include African, South Pacific, and North American Indian art, tobacco tins, adding machines, beaded pin cushions, putti, bird decoys, European seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture, old clocks and cameras, lenses, candlesticks, plants, blue-and-white earthenware, dolls, old tools, books, postcards, and works of art created by several generations of Richard's family. In its density and layers of objects, its inclusion of different cultures, and its combination of profound works of art with flea-market trinkets, the house extols the kind of free cultural association which in the art is intended to prompt viewers to explore their own creative darkness.



Self-portrait with cameras

48 *Untitled*, ca. 1945  
Mixed media and gouache on  
parchment, 22 x 18 inches  
Private Collection





Richard Pousette-Dart, *Untitled (Flora)*, late 1930s. Collection of the artist.

In the art, however, unlike the house, different cultures and forms are only suggested and not completely described because Pousette-Dart is convinced that ultimate meaning is always veiled. For him, mystery is a necessary part of in-depth understanding because it requires reliance on belief or trust, as opposed to mere thinking: “again and again I approach to unwrap the veils but with all unwrapping I find the form huddled in a formless darkness telling me infinite light is infinite belief.”<sup>24</sup> Also, because Pousette-Dart wishes to veil recognizable forms in order to use them as signs of the ultimate mystery of reality, which can only be understood as mystery and therefore is unrepresentable, an assessment of his art has to consider ambiguity and conflation as aesthetic strategies for communicating meaning. He recognized this important aspect of his art when he wrote:

*whatever the subject matter—it is  
not the subject matter  
whatever the theme or shape it  
is not the theme or shape  
whatever idea or motivating beginning  
it is not the idea or motivation  
it is always something within and  
all pervading . . .  
transcendental being it is this  
but this is not describable not  
definite<sup>25</sup>*



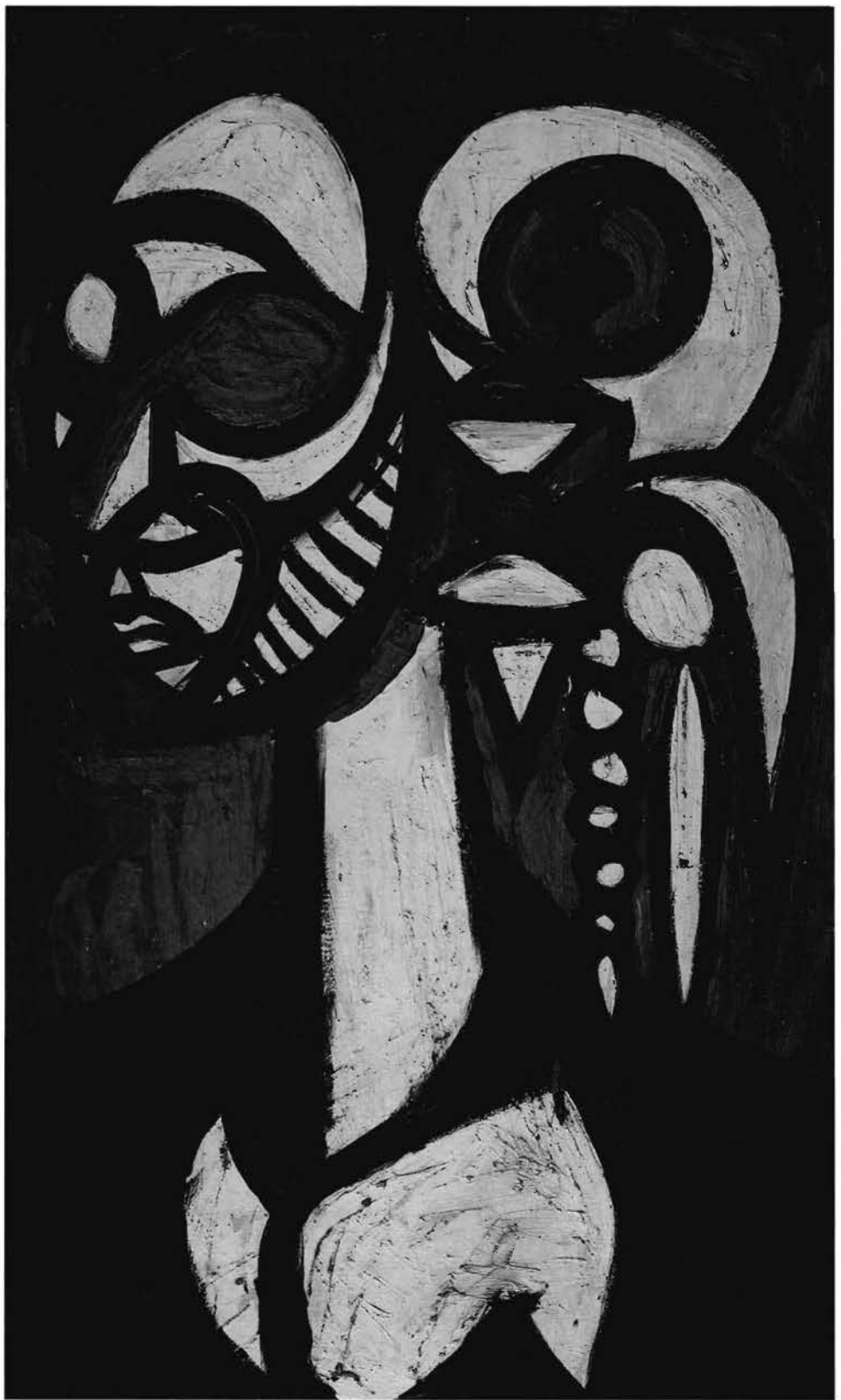
Richard Pousette-Dart, *Portrait of Lydia*, 1939–40. Collection of the artist.

These allusions to unrepresentable aspects of spiritual reality are apparent in Pousette-Dart’s paintings dating from the late 1930s. One group of works develops out of African sculpture. Among its goals, this group represents an attempt to distance the painter from his one-time friend, the artist and theorist John Graham. Like Pousette-Dart, Graham found inspiration in tribal art; he may in fact have encouraged Pousette-Dart, as he had Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, and David Smith, to look at tribal artifacts as significant works of art. But the younger artist found Graham too dogmatic and wished instead “to strive for an impersonal truth and . . . [a] philosophy of balance between abstraction and nature.”<sup>26</sup> In his early paintings of heads Pousette-Dart attempted such a balance, and he used African art as a way of transforming heads of women into abstract icons. In his notes Pousette-Dart extols African art as equal to or surpassing the work of Michelangelo<sup>27</sup> because it allowed him to take liberties with the human form and to realize his goal of picturing a higher reality.

One of the first heads in this group even anticipates Graham’s pictures of cross-eyed women who are accompanied by mystical signs and numbers. This head is an abstract portrait of the artist’s mother, Flora, who is presented as frontal, static, and hieratic. Divided by a series of bilaterally symmetrical signs, her face is united by the crescent-shaped moon formed by her cheekbones and by the fish overlapping the white key shape forming her forehead and nose. The artist keeps bilateral symmetry from becoming too dominant, however, when he creates round and square pupils in the right and left eyes, respectively, and when he differentiates earrings, symbols on the shoulders, and colors underneath the arms. In the portrait Flora is essentially a shadow figure with certain features picked out in white, and the image bespeaks the esoteric beliefs important not only to Graham and Pousette-Dart, but also to Flora herself, who had published several volumes of poetry dealing with theosophy, the fourth dimension, and the subconscious. In the foreword to *I Saw Time Open*, she describes art as “ecstatic revelation . . . [when] the secret of life is revealed, the riddle of the universe is solved. Such moments . . . constitute a mystic communion with all mankind; they convey an overwhelming realization of human brotherhood, and imperatively demand expression.”<sup>28</sup> Richard’s strange hieratic image of Flora suggests her connection with mythic realms, which are indicated by the moon and by the visual rhyming of the fish with the key making up her forehead and nose. As woman/mother/mystic creator par excellence, she serves as a symbol of intuitive understanding.

From a mystical image of his mother, Pousette-Dart moves to abstracted portraits of his second wife Lydia, who was an aspiring painter. In his first abstract painting of Lydia, the artist transforms her into the type of African-inspired image that Picasso might have created (49). Her hair and ear are joined into a large spiral that holds elaborate ornaments. In his notes of this period Pousette-Dart combined a drawing of an ear with the statement “to hear sight/to see sound.”<sup>29</sup> He then followed this passage with a spiral and a reference to “the window upon good,” no doubt to indicate that the ear and spiral are connected synaesthetically to achieve heightened awareness. His second abstract image of Lydia (50) is a slightly different African mask seen in profile rather than three-quarter’s view. Her elaborately

49 *Head of a Woman*, 1938–39  
Oil on linen, 40 x 24 inches  
Private Collection







Central Africa (Angola), Chokwe people, *Figure of Chief*, 19th century. Wood, 19 inches high. Indianapolis Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harrison Eiteljorg. Poussette-Dart used figures similar to this Chokwe piece as the basis for his meditation on the female head.

coiffed hair centers on a spiral which might represent an ear; but in the spiral's center is a disconcerting eye that stares directly at the viewer, perhaps signifying a level of consciousness far deeper than that suggested by the disembodied mask constituting the face of this figure. This eye resembles those in ancient Egyptian paintings, which are seen from the front even though the face is in profile. In this second version Lydia's head is broken into even more discrete parts. This fragmentation into individual and autonomous forms represents an important aspect of Poussette-Dart's art, and it parallels his developing interest in multiple foci, overlapping images, and all-over compositions.

In addition to these stylistic devices, Poussette-Dart explores the poetic resonance of conflation. In *African Head*, ca. 1938–39 (51) he presents on the right a mask seen in profile, placed against a large leaf. This mask is balanced on the left by a bunch of grapes, indicating nature's bounty, an idea also embodied by the huge leaf. The leaf's severed stem, in turn, serves as the snout of a powerful head that resembles a Senufo helmet mask. Poussette-Dart's ingenious conflation of forms enriches his painting by aligning the individual elements into an overall whole that suggests their common role as evocations of the powerful and mysterious spirit of nature.



Arshile Gorky, *Garden in Sochi*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 44 1/4 x 62 1/4 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase Fund and Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wolfgang S. Schwabacher (by exchange).

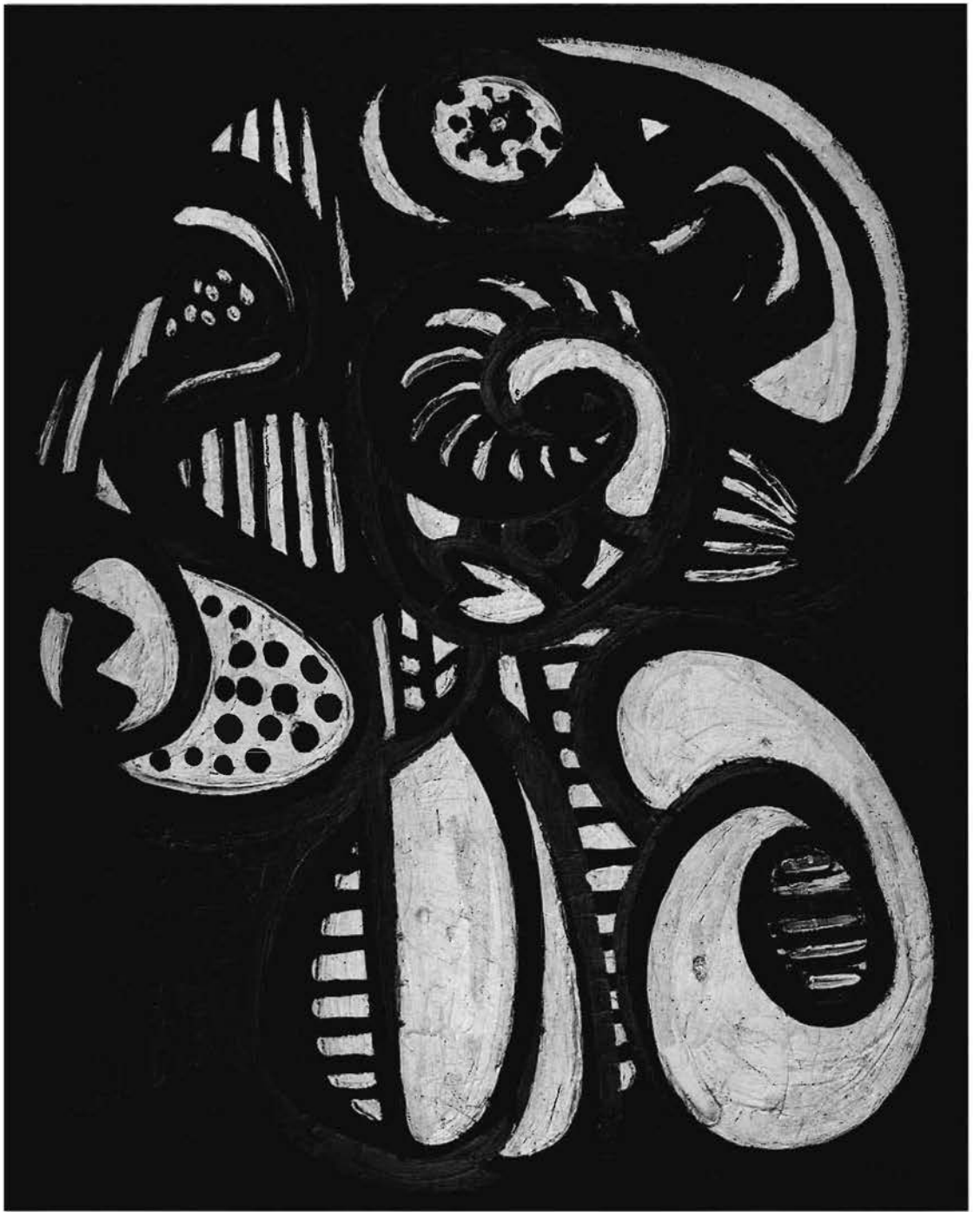
The stylistic approach used in these abstract heads becomes increasingly complex in a concurrent series of imaginary landscapes. *River Metamorphosis*, 1938–39 (52), provides a view of the enigmatic realm that awaits anyone prepared to leave the conscious world, signified by the girders of a bridge in the upper right. The artist then offers viewers a plunge into the mythic waters of the "unconscious." The unconscious is populated in this painting by birds, fish, and a strange monster on the left, whose body is equivalent to the hundred eyes of the Greek mythological giant Argus, an image of personal importance to Poussette-Dart since his aunt Olga Poussette had made a watercolor of Argus that is now in his collection. The eyes of this monster also resemble those seen in Northwest Coast American Indian art, where they are used to decorate boxes, chests, and blankets. Here these tribal eyes suggest the atavistic and symbolic ways of seeing that modern people still retain in their unconscious minds. Covered as it is with these eyes, the beast of the unconscious apprehends the world with its whole being and thus multiplies its ability to understand.

This painting comes before Arshile Gorky's *Garden in Sochi* series of ca. 1940–43, in which mysterious eyes peer out of a vaguely Surrealistic world. It also anticipates the symbolic importance of Adolph Gottlieb's *Oedipus* series of 1941, which is concerned with the Greek figure's tragic unwillingness to look at his own guilt and to recognize his role in an incestuous psychological drama so universal that Freud used Oedipus's name to describe it. A similar emphasis on eyes occurs in the paintings of William Baziotis, who, in the second half of the 1940s, found the inner eye both a poignant and macabre element that he could use in *Cyclops*, *Dwarf*, *Night Mirror*, and *Mirror Figure*. The conjunction of underwater imagery with archaic eyes fascinated Poussette-Dart, who created such works in the 1940s as *Nightflower* (53), *Blue Fantasy* (54), and *Sea World* (55).

Poussette-Dart's *Primordial Moment*, 1939 (56), presents a slightly different variation on the theme of the conscious/unconscious mind. In this painting a prominently placed white head is seen lying in profile. The head may represent a fragment of a classical sculpture, a reading substantiated by the Greek fretwork on the left and its similarity to the broken sculpted head in Picasso's *Guernica*. As a sculpture fragment, this head is symbolically separated from classical rationality, and it is used to emphasize a spiritual state, which is indicated by the singing bird emanating from its throat. Radiating from this head in a manner akin to stylized Art Deco beams of light is a cluster of tribal forms that includes eyes and heads of birds derived from Northwest Coast Indian art. As in *River Metamorphosis*, these eyes suggest the primordial seeing/knowing/feeling unconscious that connects modern people with their tribal counterparts. In *Primordial Moment*, then, Poussette-Dart encourages viewers to open themselves to their tribal unconscious, to the intuitive side symbolized by the Indian art forms.

In *East River*, 1939 (57), a third imaginary landscape of this period, Poussette-Dart uses absurdity to shock people into an awareness of the mystery, richness, and delight that the irrational world of dreams and myths offers. In this work he creates two hybrid images that move in opposite directions: one is a flying rabbit/bird; the other is a swimming

50 *Head*, 1938–39  
Oil on linen, 30 x 24 inches  
Collection of the artist





51 *African Head*, ca. 1938–39  
Oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches  
Collection of the artist



52 *River Metamorphosis*,  
1938-39  
Oil on linen, 36 x 45 inches  
Private Collection

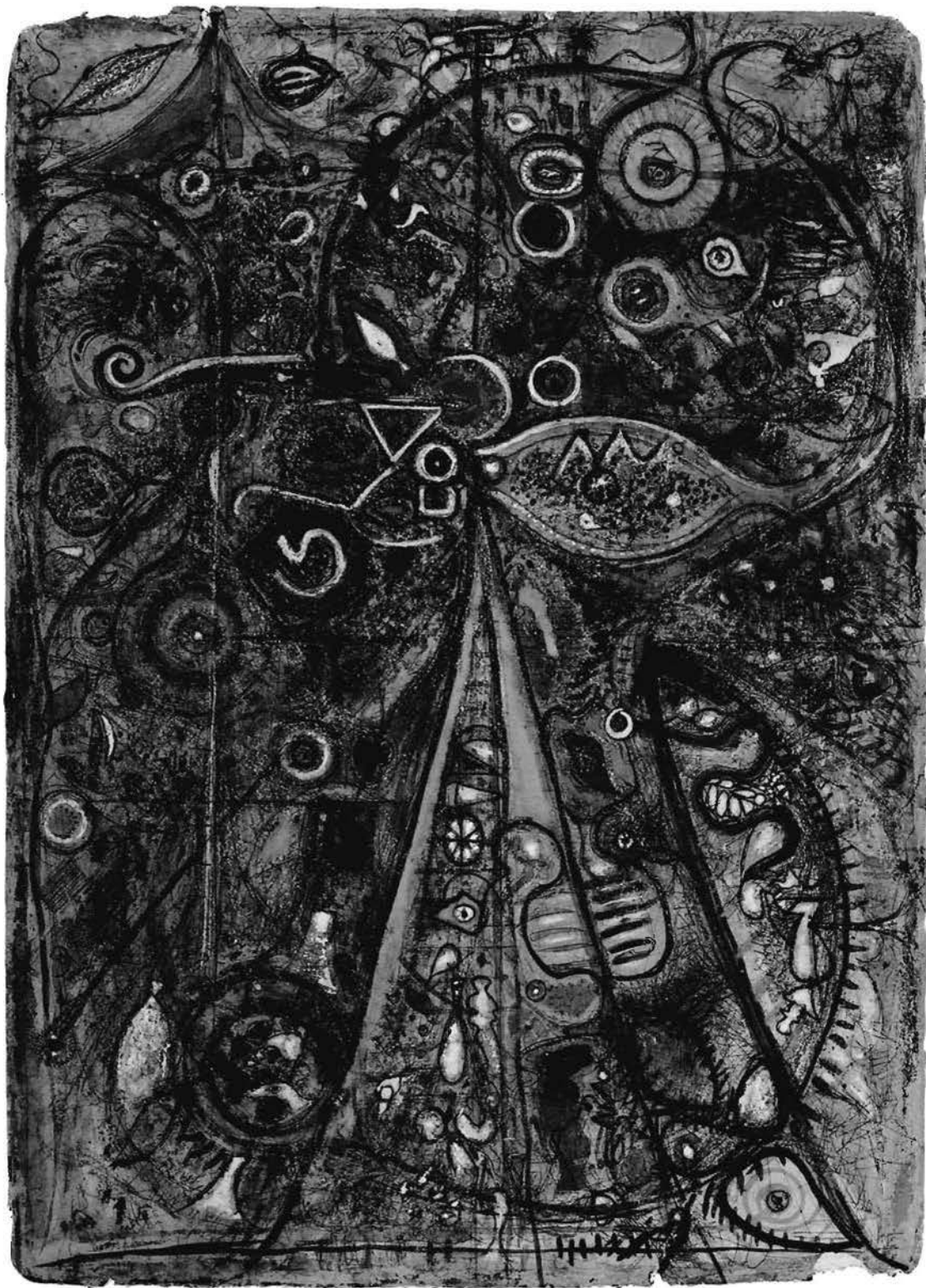


53 *Nightflower*, 1940  
Mixed media; watercolor,  
gouache, pen and ink on paper,  
8 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches  
Collection of the artist



54 *Blue Fantasy*, 1941–43  
Watercolor on paper, 6 x 9 inches  
Collection of the artist

55 *Sea World*, 1943–44  
Gouache and ink on handmade  
paper, 31¼ x 23 inches  
Collection of the artist





56 *Primordial Moment*, 1939  
Oil on linen, 36 x 48 inches  
Collection of the artist





57 *East River*, 1939  
Oil on masonite panel,  
36½ x 48¼ inches  
Collection of the artist



Pablo Picasso, *Girl Before a Mirror*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 64 x 51¼ inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim.

bird/fish. The artist has included in this painting a section of the Queensborough Bridge, over the East River, which situates this painting in a definite place in Manhattan—outside the brownstone in which he was then living—and emphasizes, in addition, the modernity and relevance of his mythic figures. The bird/fish hybrid represents an iconographic refinement of a mythological reality that is symbolized by the Chinese flying dragon and the Native American duality of underwater panther and thunderbird. In all three myths sky is joined with earth or water to indicate transcendence from prosaic reality. Balanced between these two mythic animals in Pousette-Dart's painting are a number of ovoid shapes that resemble pebbles, eggs, and eyes: symbols, perhaps, of unrevealed secrets, fertility, and insight—just rewards for crossing the bridge (the pun is evidently intended or else is a trick of the subconscious) from the rational to the intuitive mind, for leaving, in other words, the everyday and entering the mythic. The river in this painting merges with the dark sky of night to suggest the extent of the mythic realm and to indicate the total immersion in the unconscious that is necessary for true understanding.

Like *Primordial Moment* and *River Metamorphosis*, *East River* is executed in a technique suggesting stained glass. Its jewel-like intensity may well have been inspired by Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932), which is similarly concerned with a journey inward to discover one's true image. Pousette-Dart, however, differs from Picasso by using stained glass to recall church windows and by alluding to the spiritual kinship between radically different mythic forms. He establishes zones of brilliant color which are compelling in their own right and which cluster together to create images evocative of the unconscious.

Pousette-Dart's researches into the mythic dimension of the modern psyche culminated in his life-size *Bird Woman*, 1939–40 (58), a painting that inaugurates the increasingly complex imagery and large-scale of his work of the 1940s. A precedent for *Bird Woman* is this artist's *Woman Bird Group* (5), a bronze sculpture of 1939 depicting a mechanized female form, with a bird's head, holding a fledgling. This armored bird figure constitutes a critical view of a machine-oriented world and its impact on the human spirit, which begins to look as mechanical and rapacious as this bird mother. In contrast to this sculpture, *Bird Woman* is affirmative, as an examination of its complex iconography of birds, fish, eggs, a female prophet, and a swimming figure will reveal.

The *Bird Woman* is a modern-day Arcimboldo, consisting of a crescent moon for a headdress, a mask-like face, a fish for a mouth, a bird-shaped right ear, and a horn in place of the left ear. She holds in her hand a bird that becomes the wings of another creature, which holds in its mouth a reddish-brown form constituting still another bird. Her body is composed of birds, fishes, and egg shapes that serve respectively as symbols of the spirit, the unconscious, and fecundity. Her heart looks like both an enameled brooch and an artist's palette. A complex grouping of forms in the lower section of the painting might well represent an abstract white wave with a white snail and a swimmer whose torso becomes a shield emblazoned with a face pointing in the opposite direction from the rest of his body. This warrior's head consists of a series of ideograms, including a white cloud shape that resembles a Jean Arp concretion, a golden tower, and a steel girder. Many of these images might well suggest the fragments of the unconscious mind, which are sometimes trapped when the conscious mind free-associates about clouds, while the tower in the painting may connote the isolation of the self, and the girder may indicate the rationality and force of the conscious mind. The different attitudes expressed by this swimmer, who moves in one direction while his shield faces the opposite direction, suggest the multiple challenges facing an adventurer on a mythic journey. His shield and helmet reinforce the idea that he is the proverbial hero exploring uncharted territory in order to discover his real self. On either side of this swimming figure are egg shapes: one is whole, the other is segmented, and both contain nuclei that are symbols of fecundity and are also similar to eyes in Northwest Coast American Indian art. The conjunction of *Bird Woman* with water, fish, and a swimmer indicates the artist's concern with the mythic waters of the unconscious, where spiritual insight equals depth and a retreat inward.

*Bird Woman* can be compared to Jackson Pollock's works of the same period, particularly his *Man*, *Bull*, *Bird*, his *Birth*, and his *Bird*, which all date from ca. 1938–41. The similarity is all the more noteworthy because Pollock did not exhibit his early Abstract Expressionist works until January 1942, when John Graham invited him to show *Birth* in the exhibition *American and French Paintings* at the McMillen Gallery. A few months before the McMillen exhibition in October–November 1941 Pousette-Dart had a one-person show at the Artists' Gallery. Since the gallery was sponsored by influen-



Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Autumn*, 16th century. Pinacoteca, Brescia. (Scala/Art Resource)

58 *Bird Woman*, 1939–40  
Oil on linen, 72 x 40 inches  
Collection of the artist





Ivory Coast, Western Sudan, Senufo people, Face Mask (*Kpeli-Yèhè*). Wood, 14 inches high. The University of Iowa Museum of Art. The Stanley Collection. The overall configuration of Pegeen's face bears an astonishing resemblance to Senufo face masks.

tial critics and art historians, including Clive Bell, Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., Walter Pach, Meyer Schapiro, and James Johnson Sweeney, his show would have been noticed by other artists. Like Pousette-Dart, Pollock was involved in his early work with mythic dimensions of the self that can be understood in terms of ancient and tribal art. While Pollock shares with Pousette-Dart an interest in Jungian psychology, Picasso's art, and the theories of Graham, Pousette-Dart develops out of still other traditions that are tied to his childhood and sense of spirituality. Although Graham had suggested to Pousette-Dart, as he had to Pollock, the connections between tribal art, modern French painting, and psychology, he cannot serve as the sole source for Pousette-Dart's interest in the spiritual dimensions of modern humanity.

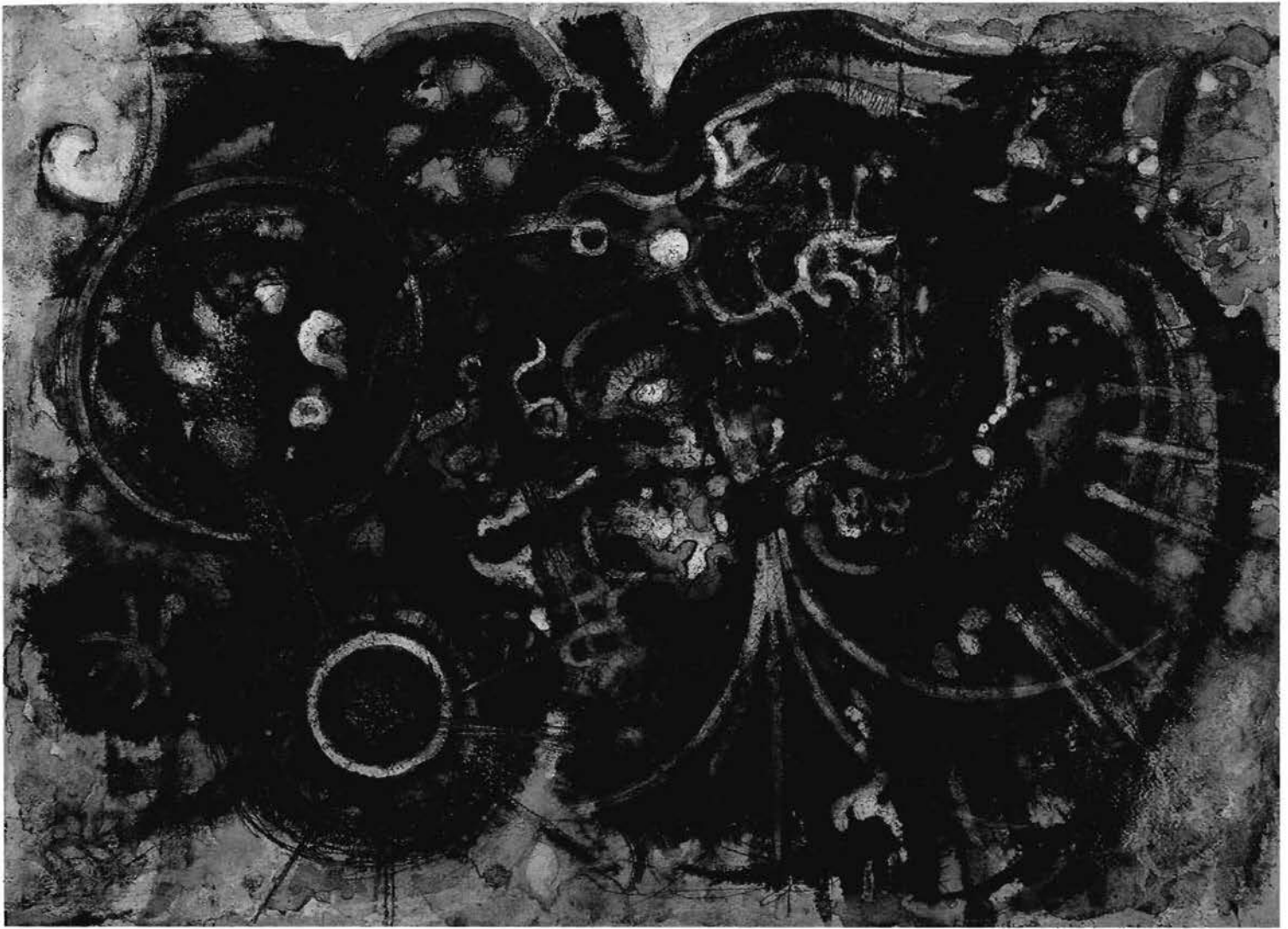
The paintings of this period reflect Pousette-Dart's intense concern with spiritual matters. This is particularly evident in the sweeping rhythms of *The Boundless Atom*, 1941–43 (59), a work on paper that reflects his understanding of the very similar, spiritually-motivated expressionistic art of Wassily Kandinsky, which was amply represented in the collection of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York. A confirmed pacifist who was willing to go to jail rather than join the army, the artist immersed himself in the late 1930s and early 1940s in the religious thought of both the East and the West. His notebooks are full of ecstatic insights, such as the statement, "I say everything is connected and is one, transmutes, transcends, is immediate eternal life with you and me."<sup>30</sup> This belief in unity accounts for the complexity of interpenetrating forms making up *Bird Woman*, who is at once primordial mask; Diana, goddess of the moon; and the embodiment of spiritual wisdom. Pousette-Dart confirms his belief in totality by writing, "Only with the fabric of all as one . . . does the eye truly see, not of this eye is sight but of belief darkly knowing."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, he spells out the implications of this for his own work: "art is only significant as it takes us to the whole man and gives us new insights and opens secrets toward the unknown heart of our total mystic awareness."<sup>32</sup>

Unlike Pollock, who turned Jungian psychology into a new religion, Pousette-Dart finds aspects of the old religions useful as universal routes to human understanding and fulfillment. Although Pollock and Pousette-Dart discovered different ways of approaching the same truth about the universal self in its mythic dimension, their art manifests a common interest in ambiguity as a clue to the ultimate mystery of being; in conflation as an artistic means

for manifesting the chaos of the unconscious mind, which leads to true creativity; in African and Native American images as a way to signal basic feelings of modern humanity; and in personal and inherited mythology as a condensed vocabulary for expressing spiritual and/or psychological growth. One of Pousette-Dart's most complex works of the early 1940s, *Bird in the Wind* (60) parallels the conflation and ambiguity of Jackson Pollock's psychoanalytic drawings.

Connections between inner and outer worlds fascinate Pousette-Dart. In 1943 he painted a psychological portrait of Peggy Guggenheim's daughter Pegeen, which is his most Surrealist work. The presence of the European Surrealists in New York during World War II clearly affected the American art scene. Peggy Guggenheim, who was married to Max Ernst, had opened the important commercial art gallery Art of This Century. Ernst's concept of Surrealism as a type of hyper-realism that served to pry open the surface of things and reveal their inner contents was intriguing to a number of American artists. These Americans hoped to rid themselves of Art Deco aspects and come to terms with their own feelings—a path that led to Abstract Expressionism.

*Portrait of Pegeen* (61) amplifies Pousette-Dart's belief in the unitary nature of reality by showing a symbolic portrait of a young girl who confronts her inner self by looking in a mirror. The painting serves as a critique of Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* by suggesting greater connections between inner and outer worlds. Pegeen, the child on the left who can be identified by a ponytail, looks at a more mature version of herself, suggested by the seductive blond wave on the right. Her face bears no resemblance to the masks of Pousette-Dart's earlier heads, even though it develops out of an interest in African sculpture and is closely connected to Senufo masks. In *Portrait of Pegeen*, unlike his earlier heads, the artist has employed an x-ray vision similar to that in the art of a number of prehistoric cultures as well as in the art of the Chumash, Zuni, and Australian Aborigines. More complex than its tribal prototypes, the x-ray style of Pegeen's face uncovers a teeming biomorphic realm of unicellular life, abstracted eyes, and tribal implements to indicate the richness of her inner world. Although jumbled, these forms are dominated by a large central eye. From the young Pegeen another eye reaches out to inspect closely the image in the mirror, and in the process it becomes part of its vision. The painting not only



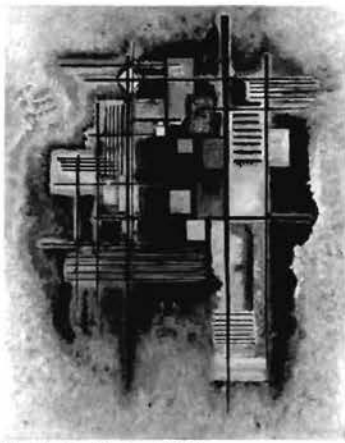
59 *The Boundless Atom*,  
1941-43  
Mixed media; watercolor,  
pen and ink on paper,  
22 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 31 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches  
Collection of the artist



60 *Bird in the Wind*, 1942  
Oil on linen, 26 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 44 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches  
Collection of the artist



61 *Portrait of Pegeen*, 1943  
Oil on linen, 50 x 52 inches  
The Detroit Institute of Arts  
Founders Society Purchase,  
W. Hawkins Ferry Fund



Wassily Kandinsky, *Verdichtung* (*Compression*), 1929. Oil on canvas, 39½ x 31½ inches. The University of Iowa Museum of Art. Gift of Owen and Leone Elliott. Late works by Kandinsky, like *Verdichtung*, that rely increasingly on geometric grids served as a basis for *The Edge*.



Richard Pousette-Dart, *Crucifixion, Comprehension of the Atom*, 1944. Oil on linen, 77½ x 49 inches. Collection of the artist.

develops from Picasso but also depends on the advances of Joan Miró's Surrealist paintings of the 1920s and 1930s to reach the core beneath the surface. *Portrait of Pegeen* is a positive symbolic image of a young girl who grapples with a more self-possessed image of herself.

Pousette-Dart continues his interest in inner and outer worlds in *The Edge* (62) of the following year, a painting clearly anticipated in the watercolor *Opaque Harmony*, 1941–43 (63). This interest is also apparent in *Abstract Eye*, 1941–43 (64). *The Edge* presents a Rube Goldberg apparatus consisting of turning blades, gears, fan belts, and spirals that connect various parts and suggest movement. On the lower right, abstract cloud forms imply that this machine is not a simple mechanical apparatus but instead is the great cosmic machine that Eastern mystics describe as ordering the universe. The more one studies this machine, the more it appears cosmic and four-dimensional, with its planets and astral forms seen in conjunction with a large, orderly grid. On the lower right, the artist plays with an illusory world by depicting a nail and its reflection, a reference no doubt to the nail and shadow appearing in Georges Braque's Cubist painting *The Portuguese* of 1911. The nail in Pousette-Dart's painting, however, is suspended in space; its only purpose is to show the impossibility of fixing anything in this colliding, expanding, and changing universe. The artist uses scumbled paint, layered forms, pentimenti, and transparency to give this machine a depth and resonance impossible for any simple mechanical instrument. And the work's similarity to the spiritual art of Kandinsky strongly supports the claim that his machine is intended to be cosmic rather than prosaic.

The title of this work refers to Pousette-Dart's use of the edge as a metaphysical concept to convey the power of the subconscious. The edge is the indecipherable line separating the conscious from the unconscious mind and the particular from the universal:

*I want to keep a balance just on the edge of awareness, the narrow rim between the conscious and subconscious, a balance between expanding and contracting, silence and sound.*<sup>33</sup>

The closer one gets to the edge, the less distinct it is; at a certain point the edge, which is analogous to a line in art, ceases to be distinct and absolute and becomes a symbol for tremulous being. Pousette-Dart has equated the edge with universal oneness or God:

*The edge is anonymous and contains  
All personalities without personality  
All individual difference without signature.  
Or inequality. The edge IS equality of  
Difference, love AS truth, darkly light being.*<sup>34</sup>

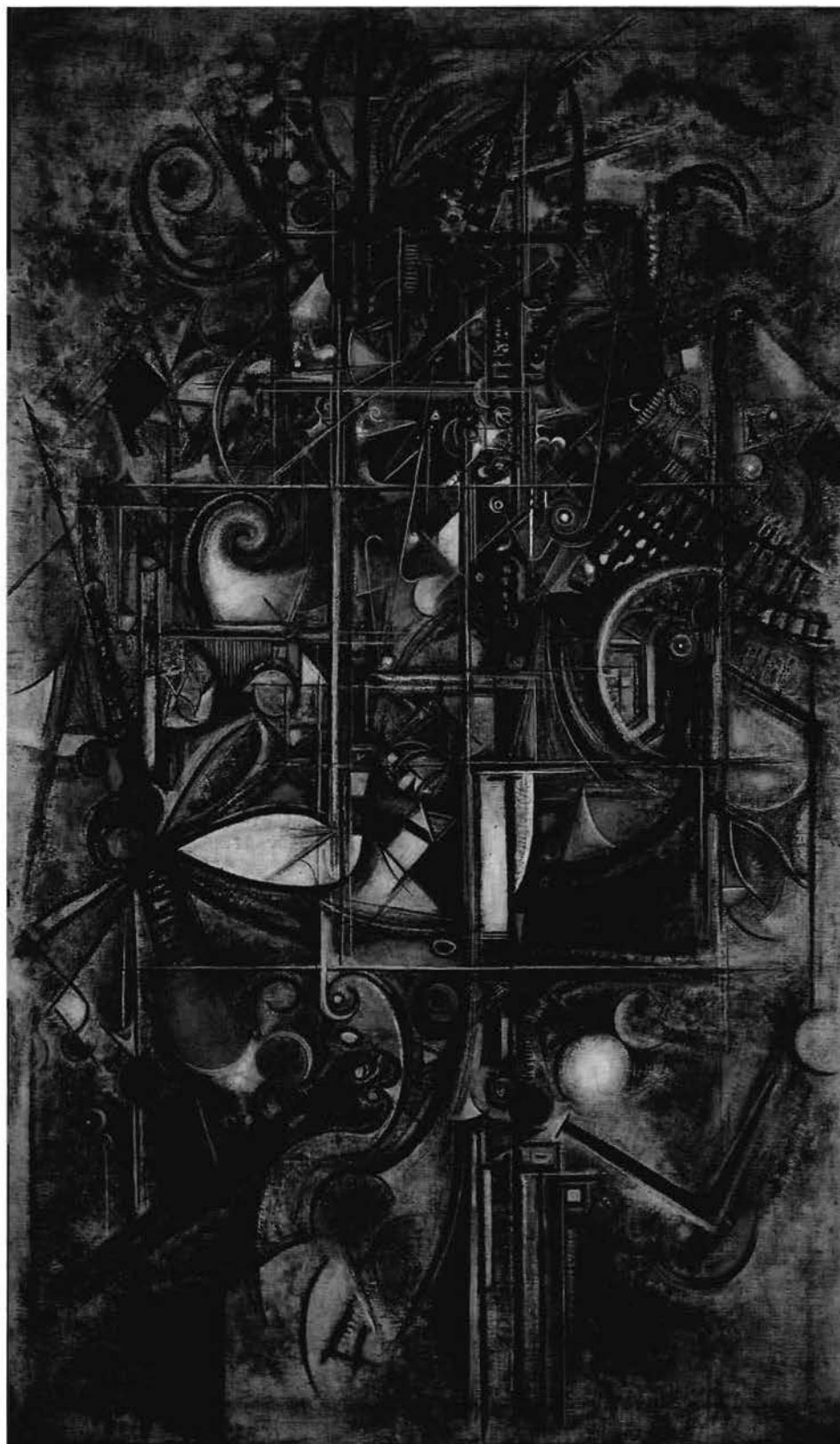
He admits that "every painter has an edge to himself and this is his anonymity," or his unconscious, for "the edge is inside within me I am the edge."<sup>35</sup> Given the edge's value as a conduit to the God within, it is reasonable to assume that a painting entitled *The Edge* would attempt to bridge the gap between the conscious and the unconscious through the analogy of bridging the gap between realism and abstraction. It is not surprising, then, that except for a few watercolors such as *Ascending* (65) and *City Dream* (66), which both date from 1945, *The Edge* served as a watershed work, marking the last traces of an illusionism that was to become increasingly obscured by myriad brush strokes, drips, and deliberately inchoate passages of paint, which signaled the triumph of experimentation over clearly achieved results and the importance of being as a vital changing force over stasis, or death.

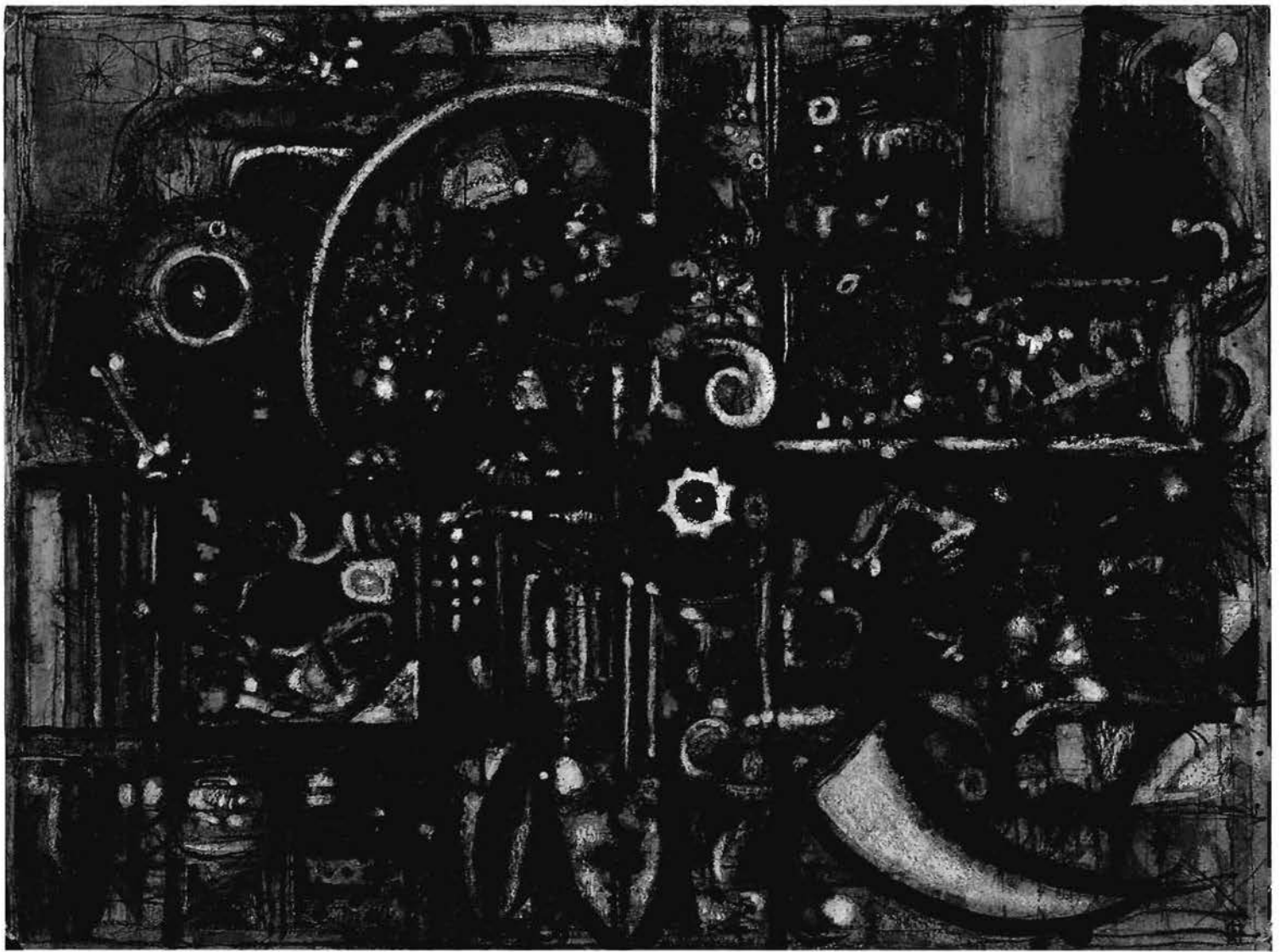
In the painting *Abstract Eye* (65), the artist maintains some feeling for both the grid and the cosmic machine that appeared in *The Edge*, but he reorients his subject matter to make it accord with the work's reduced scale. Instead of the cosmos, *Abstract Eye* calls to mind a microscopic world of unicellular forms that share their space with a fish and an abstract eye. The entire composition pulsates with life, and the sweeping lines in this painting have at their center a black spider who has spun a web to capture this teeming, fecund world. The painting thus contains positive and negative elements; like the images in dreams, it is both inviting and disconcerting.

Focusing on the positive and negative aspects of creation is a central concern of *Crucifixion, Comprehension of the Atom*, 1944 (11), a painting that alludes to the destructive force that nuclear fission is capable of unleashing on the world. Although the word "Crucifixion" in the title might refer to the punishment of Jesus of Nazareth, the painting, according to the artist, is intended to be more generally concerned with the crossroads facing someone on a mythic journey. A crucifixion is a symbolic testing, a separation of the material from the spiritual; and it stands for the tragedy of humanity, which has rejected its divinity, its Christ-



62 *The Edge*, 1943  
Oil on canvas, 81 x 47½ inches  
Collection of the artist



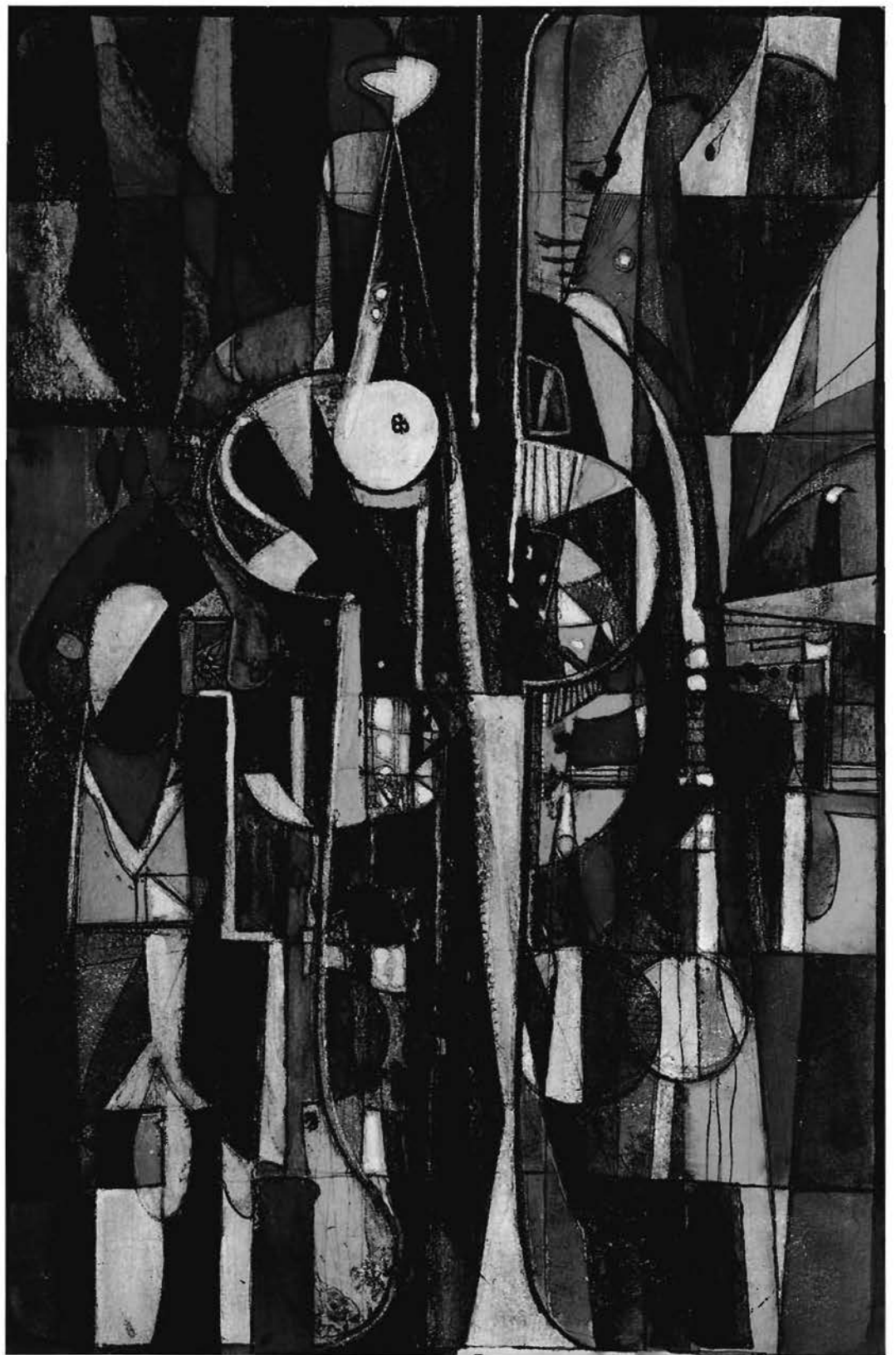


63 *Opaque Harmony*, 1941-43  
Mixed media; gouache,  
watercolor, pen and ink on paper,  
22 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 30 $\frac{3}{8}$  inches  
Collection of the artist

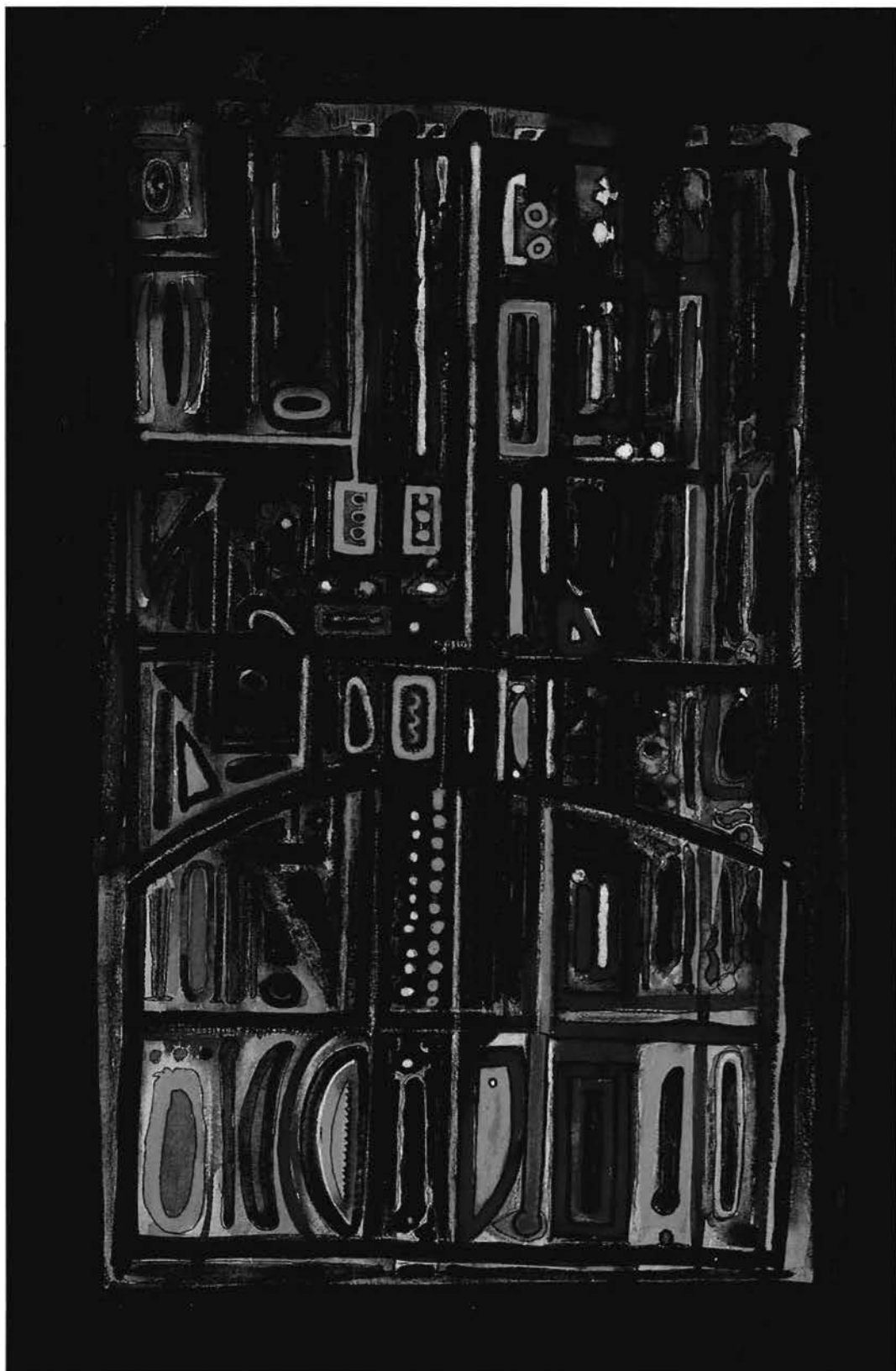
64 *Abstract Eye*, 1941–43  
Oil on linen, 21 x 16½ inches  
Collection of the artist



65 *Ascending*, 1945  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 x 11<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
Collection of the artist



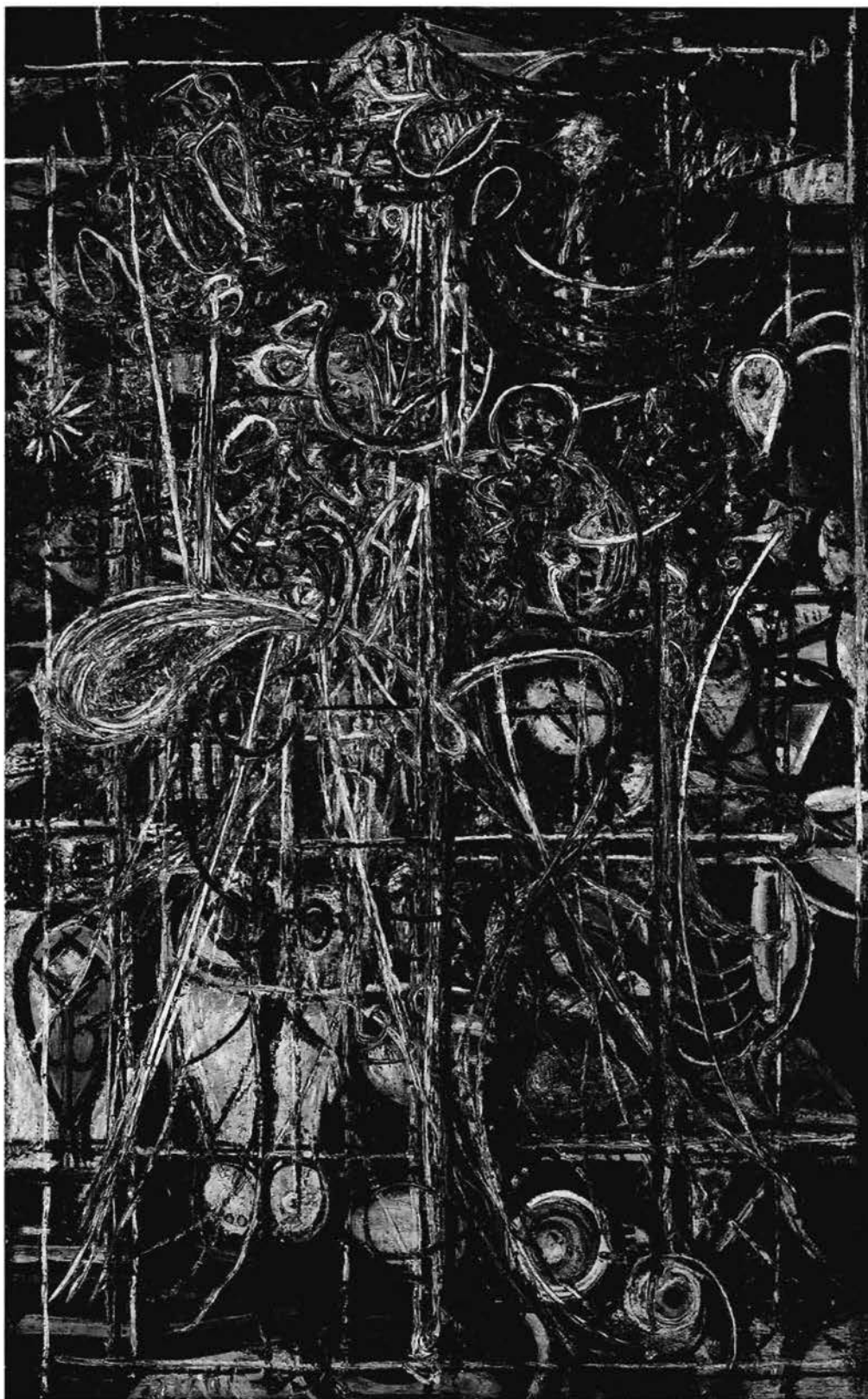
66 *City Dream*, 1945  
Watercolor on paper,  
18 x 12 inches  
Collection of the artist



67 *The Atom, One World*,  
1947-48  
Oil on linen, 50 x 53½ inches  
Private Collection



68 *Figure*, 1944-45  
Oil on linen, 79 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 50 inches  
Collection of the artist





Jackson Pollock, *Portrait of H. M.*, 1945.  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 43 inches.  
The University of Iowa Museum of Art.  
Gift of Peggy Guggenheim.

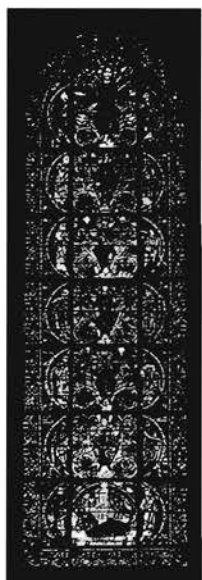
likeness. In this work Poussette-Dart suggests that the divinity of the atom, its integrity of spirit/body and energy/form, is likewise being crucified. The glowing egg at the center anticipates by a year the phosphorescent light of the first atom bomb, dubbed “Trinity” and tested by the Los Alamos Group on July 16, 1945, which led in a few weeks to the bombing of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the painting the glowing egg symbolizes the destruction of the unity of the universe as well as the disintegration of the personal truth of the unified man/god symbolized by the crucified Christ. The head of the figure in the painting is a dark ovoid. Separated from the luminous colored background, the blackened figure has been destroyed. Submerged beneath the lower part of this figure is a fish, a symbol of Christ and perhaps also the unconscious. In this painting Poussette-Dart regards the destruction of the atom as a metaphor for the potential destruction of humankind. Later in *The Atom, One World*, 1947–48 (67), he is less poetic and indirect as he presents an image of the ominous mushroom cloud of a nuclear blast. The “One World” of the title is intended to be disturbingly ironic, since it refers to the fact that world unity is attained through the common threat of nuclear destruction.

The spectral and dark forces of the unconscious loom large in *Figure*, 1944–45 (68). In this painting a black-and-white grid blocks the foreground figure from the colorful background shapes that recall fish, masks, simple geometric forms, and unicellular life. The grid in this painting thus serves a function analogous to the constraining prison-like grids found in sculptures that Seymour Lipton, Ibram Lassaw, and Herbert Ferber, among others, created in the 1940s and the heavy black lines in early Pollocks such as *Portrait of H. M.* From Poussette-Dart’s grid emerges a black-and-white wraith with a grinning skull and possibly wings, which would indicate that it is an angel of death. The exuberant paint obscures this form, making its head appear to be a skull as well as a New Guinea mask with an arrow piercing its nose. Overlapping this wraith is a complex group of intertwined signs in the form of white letters, flowers, fish, geometric shapes, and sprawling whiplashes of paint that turn the figure into a spectral Rorschach, thus forcing viewers to participate in the interpretation of the painting by transforming it into a personal experience. *Figure* employs a number of culturally encoded forms relating to biomorphism, primitivism, stained glass, and grids to allude to the fact that its penumbral realm is the unconscious. (His implicit reference to stained glass became explicit a decade later when he

titled a watercolor *Presence, Cathedral Window* (69).) In addition, in *Figure*, Poussette-Dart uses paint as an automatic gestural overlay to suggest a mystically inspired sign system. It is similar to the mystical “white writing” of Mark Tobey, who exhibited in the same gallery. Although Poussette-Dart’s gestural use of paint achieves an entirely different meaning from Tobey’s delicate skeins, it might be considered part of a dialogue that Tobey’s work elicited.

In 1941 Poussette-Dart selected a piece of stretched canvas 90 by 120 inches and then spent several years working on it to find a way of manifesting his personal vision on a large scale. He first exhibited the painting at Peggy Guggenheim’s *Art of This Century* in 1947. Entitled *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental* (17), this work is composed of the same complex system of signs that the artist used in a number of paintings of the early 1940s: spiraling nebulae, birds, eggs, grids, white writing, x-ray vision, and allusions to a cosmic machine. Like his other works, *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental* is heavily encoded and deliberately ambiguous. It is a visual metaphor for the spirit or unconscious that joins elements of the microcosm such as flagella with cosmic forms to attest to the fecundity of chaos and the cosmic rhythms of the life force. The painting calls to mind Freud’s comparison of the subconscious mind to a child’s magic writing tablet, particularly the complex impressions left in wax.

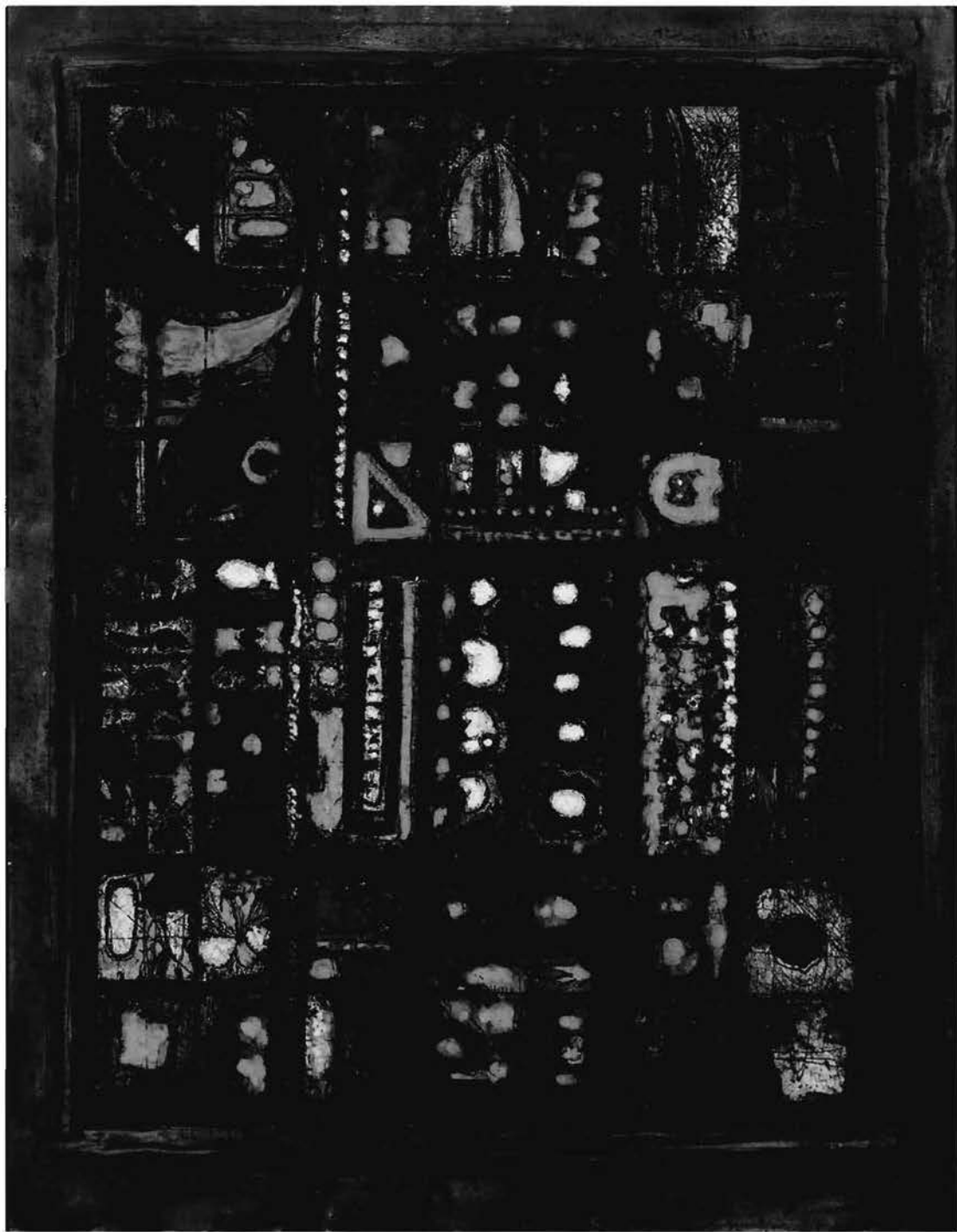
The scale of *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental* recalls the great history paintings that the French academy once favored. But in place of their commonly understood subject matter relating to historical, mythological, or literary events, Poussette-Dart has presented a personally intuited vision, thus making a Romantic statement about the nature of reality. He believes that he must begin with the personal and pursue it until it becomes universal and anonymous. He is convinced that a work of art will begin to establish its own significance when it transcends the limited individuality of the artist: “All things in themselves exalt, of themselves are exalted, to transcend themselves, to break all boundaries, to leap past limitations, to permeate into Everywhere.”<sup>36</sup> As a way of affirming this interest in going beyond the personal, Poussette-Dart has for decades refused to sign his art. In his lecture in 1951 at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, he explained his refusal: “Real painting is



*Tree of Jesse* window, Royal Portal, Chartres Cathedral, early 13th century (Giraudon/Art Resource). In *Figure* Poussette-Dart relies on stained glass as an established vocabulary for the sacred. His *Figure* is conceived in black forms similar to the leading of stained glass and is surrounded by rich colors recalling its luminosity. But instead of representing the sacred, his spectral and enigmatic figure inverts it, creating a horrific image of the denizens of the unconscious.



69 *Presence, Cathedral Window*,  
1955  
Mixed media; watercolor, pen and  
ink on paper, 14 x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Collection of the artist



untitled and unsigned, it is a flower of its own self, its self is its own signature and its own name."<sup>37</sup> Although he has since decided that titles are more convenient ways of remembering specific works of art than numbers, he has maintained to this day a belief in art's autonomy and in the comparative insignificance of the artist's ego. His disdain for the ego separates him from many of his fellow Abstract Expressionists, who followed the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in believing that their concerns and experiences are symptomatic of humankind and therefore universally valid. Unlike many members of this group, Pousette-Dart believes that the ego is limited and must be transcended if one is ever to approach the kind of universal music that he hopes to convey in *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental*.

The monumental painting also reflects the importance of music to abstract painters in the first half of this century, who believed it to be the highest and most abstract art form. In *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental* and the several *Fugues* (70) he created during the years he was working on this painting, Pousette-Dart was developing a special, poetic, and nontranslatable pictorial language:

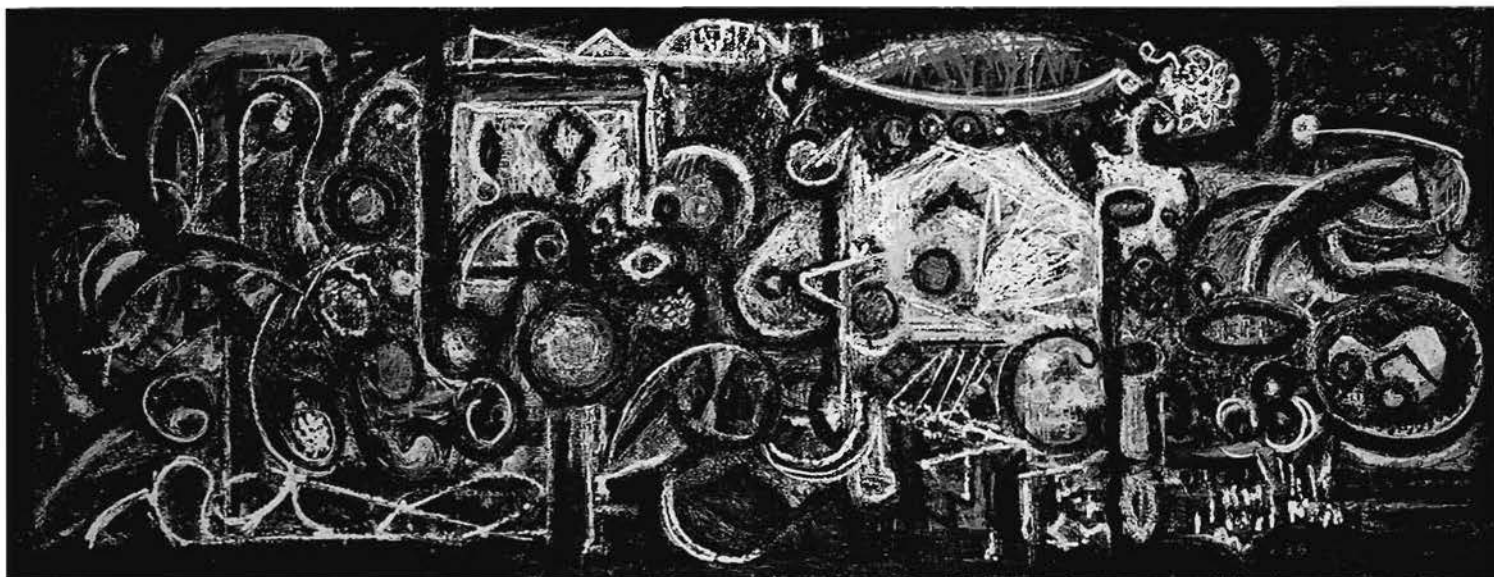
*Here are some words  
form of the inner language  
the feeling delved deep hieroglyph  
not meant to mean, still  
meaning, meaning more  
the gleanings of the spirits' mind  
leaps past frail literality  
where cosmic cords are sound fugues  
not records to be writ with words  
the elements record their own  
eloquent potent signatures<sup>38</sup>*

Since a fugue is a musical composition designed for a specific number of instruments or voices in which a theme is first presented in one voice before being developed by others, it is an apt title for paintings that play on the culturally encoded voices of stained glass, primitivism, Surrealism, mystical languages, and biomorphism.

At times Pousette-Dart has felt the need to reflect on his abstract images by making collages with materials from the real world. In them he overlaps realistic equivalents of the abstract signs that are layered in the paintings to the point of unrecognizability. The collage *Untitled (Ricardo)*, 1946–48 (71), is apposite, since "Ricardo" is Spanish for "Richard," and the collage is an emblem of the

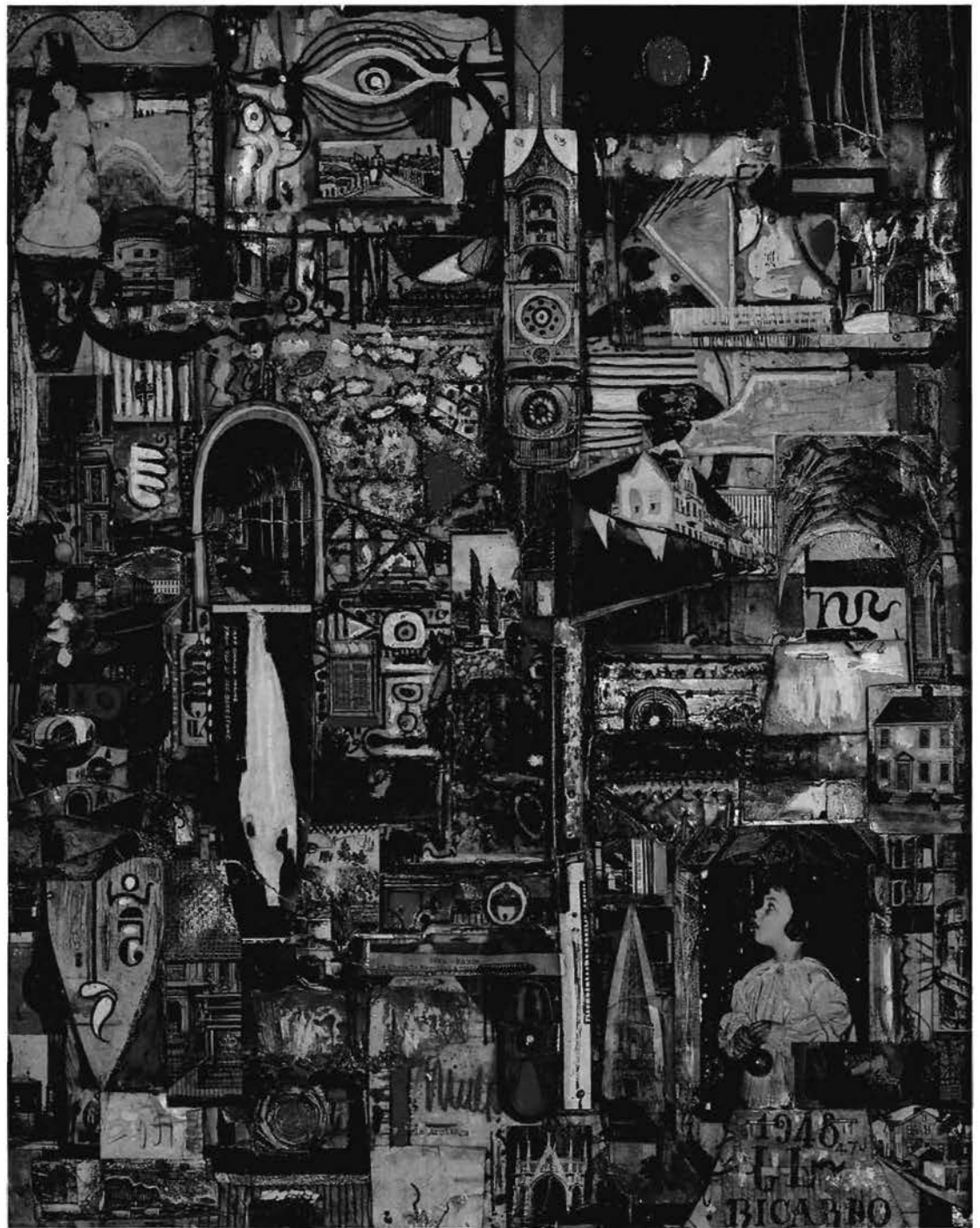
artist. A notable image in the collage is the photograph of the artist's daughter Joanna decorating a Christmas tree. Seen in connection with a number of traditional religious symbols, including European churches, the photograph becomes a personal way of viewing the sacred. The conjunction of a Gothic nave with a snake calls to mind Pousette-Dart's interest in chaos. A traditional image of chaos, the snake symbolizes the uncreated form at the core of the creative experience, and its place in the nave of a church suggests the spiritual growth which transforms chaos into order. The Greek marble Venus in this collage could represent traditional beauty and also the rational approach of the Greeks, while the shield with a backward "5"—reminiscent of Leonardo's mirror writing—and a schematic figure point to the private languages artists have frequently used. A drawn fish with an eye or an egg, which also occurs in a number of the artist's paintings, may refer to seeing as both understanding and a means of rebirth and regeneration. The German word "heute" ("today"), written in red, could signify the end of the war, which came just as Pousette-Dart was beginning this collage, and the need then to forget the past and begin anew. Certainly "heute," in conjunction with Joanna, who represents the next generation, and the Christmas tree, which symbolizes rebirth in the midst of winter, is a provocative challenge. In addition, the Spanish "Ricardo," German "heute," and the many different European churches and cultures represented in this collage suggest the importance of different ways of viewing the world and convey the artist's ecumenical approach to religion and life.

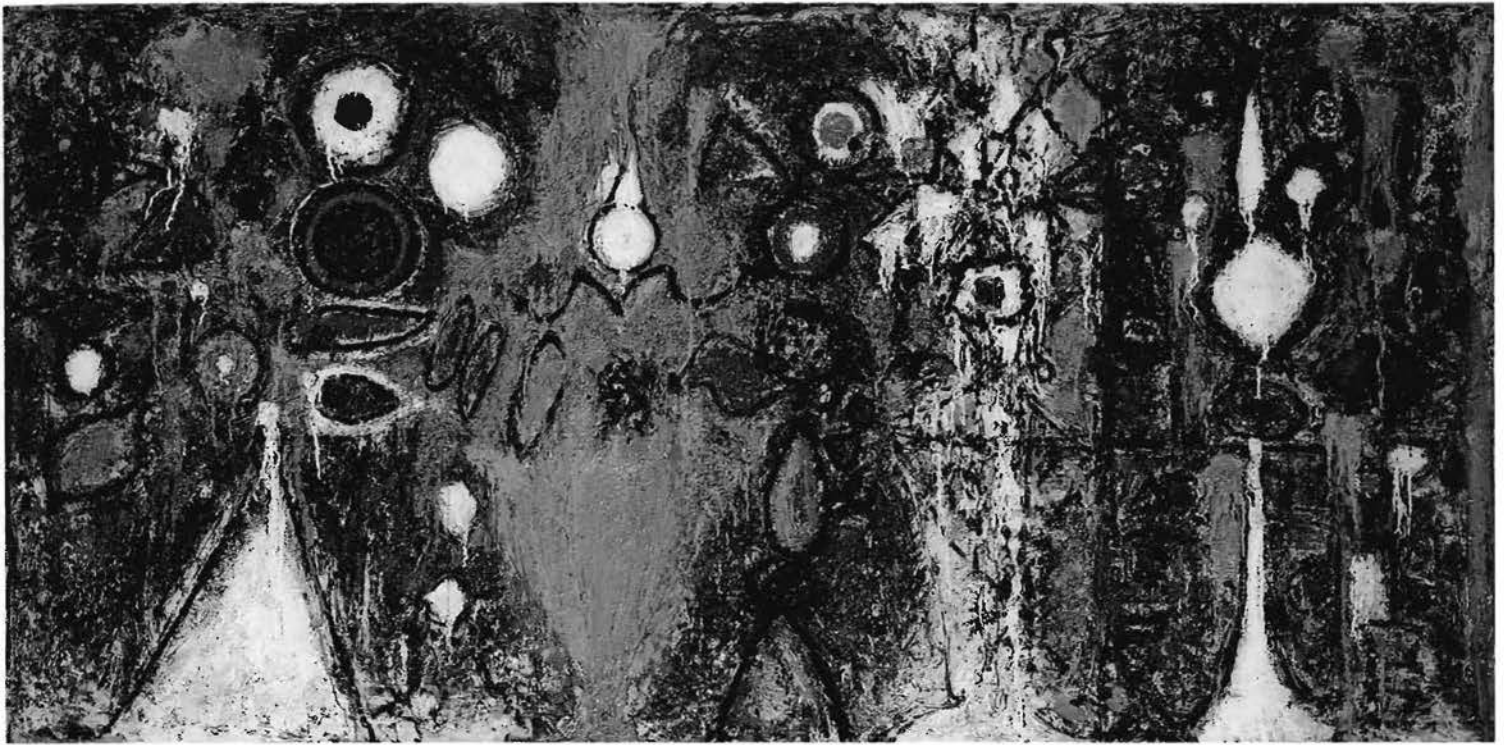
In the 1930s and early 1940s Pousette-Dart further discovered and developed his style, and in the 1950s he grew more comfortable with it, learning, so to speak, to play it in different keys and with increasingly varied tempos, even though his overall orientation remained essentially unchanged. Pousette-Dart still explored the mystery, process, and creative force of the spirit/unconscious mind. While he continued in such works as *Number 1, 1951* (72) to make references to eyes, eggs, and amoebic forms and to use these elements as basic building blocks of his compositions, his palette became richer and his colors grew more luminous. In addition, he veered away from the dark and sometimes even threatening tonalities of his paintings of the war years and began to create works that were exuberant and even joyous. In place of the wraith of *Figure* or



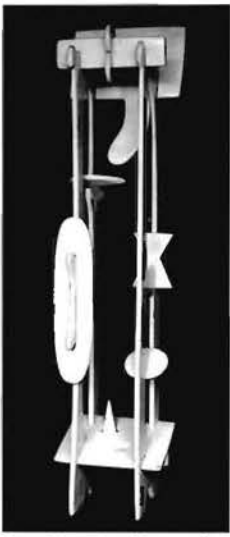
70 *Fugue Number 2*, 1943  
Oil and sand on canvas,  
41 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 106 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York  
Given Anonymously, 1969

71 *Untitled (Ricardo)*, 1946–48  
Collage, 20 x 16 inches  
Private Collection





72 *Number 1, 1951*, 1950-51  
Oil on linen, 42½ x 85 inches  
Collection Marisa del Re Gallery,  
New York



Isamu Noguchi, *Metamorphosis*, 1946. White Italian marble, 68½ inches high. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Henry Heinz II, B.A. 1931, Fund.

the dying abstract figure of *Crucifixion, Comprehension of the Atom*, postwar paintings contain groups of totemic figures that signify ecstatic revelations rather than dire premonitions. The totemic figures of *Number 1, 1951* and other paintings of the period accord with a growing trend among the Abstract Expressionists to populate their canvases with enigmatic personages whose source is both the subconscious and the art of Metaphysical painters and Surrealists, particularly Giorgio de Chirico's jerry-built mannequins and Alberto Giacometti's tremulous postwar figures, which go beyond Surrealism to achieve a personal and intuitive sense of reality. Although some personages, such as Willem de Kooning's women, Jackson Pollock's black-and-white figures, and William Baziot's hybrids, continue to be troubling denizens, others emerge from the darkness to be seen in new revelatory light. Both Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko find ways of transmuting the personages stemming from their unconscious by making them embodiments of light in "zips" and "multiforms," respectively. And David Smith uses humor in the form of found objects welded together in his Tank Totems as a way of lightening the burden of his World War II despair and proclaiming a new and more optimistic postwar era. These last three Abstract Expressionists share with Pousette-Dart an interest in befriending the unconscious mind while still paying homage to its mystery and autonomy.

The enigmatic figures of Pousette-Dart's *Number 1, 1951* convey an almost Byzantine quality. Both familiar and strange, they are grand abstract equivalents of the famous Ravenna mosaics of Emperor Justinian and Empress Theodora, who are each pictured with their attendants. Significantly, Pousette-Dart's figures neither emerge totally out of a background nor stand completely isolated on a shallow stage. Instead they oscillate between foreground and background, becoming part of one overall fluctuant surface that is marked at times by dissolving white personages and at other times by emergent gold ones.

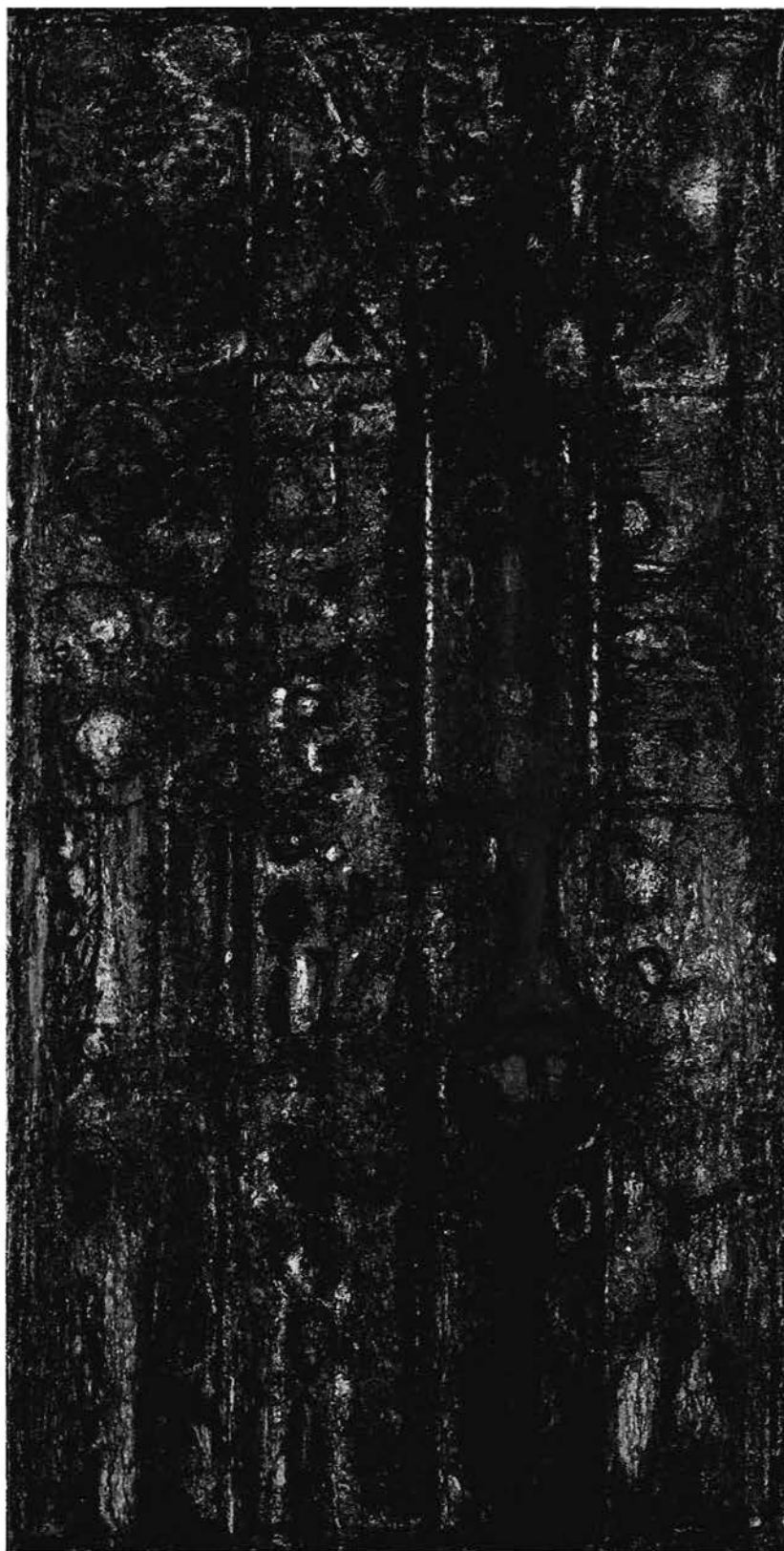
*The Magnificent*, 1950–51 (73), proclaims this newly befriended realm in all its splendor. Picturing a refined, inviting, and thoroughly radiant chaos, *The Magnificent* is notable for its joyous, majestic colors and its quivering indecisiveness, as if it consisted of unicellular life being viewed through a microscope. It is possible to get lost in certain passages of this painting, which look as if the colors of Impressionism have been released from the servitude of describing the world and now are free to reveal

themselves as the opulence of heavily encrusted paint. The layered surface reflects the time spent carefully working out the artistic solutions making up this painting. Like Pousette-Dart's pictures of the 1940s, *The Magnificent* is culturally encoded with allusions to stained glass (spirituality), amoebas (gestating life), grids (rationality), drawing (the artist's initial thoughts), and layered forms (the complexity and unity of the unconscious mind).

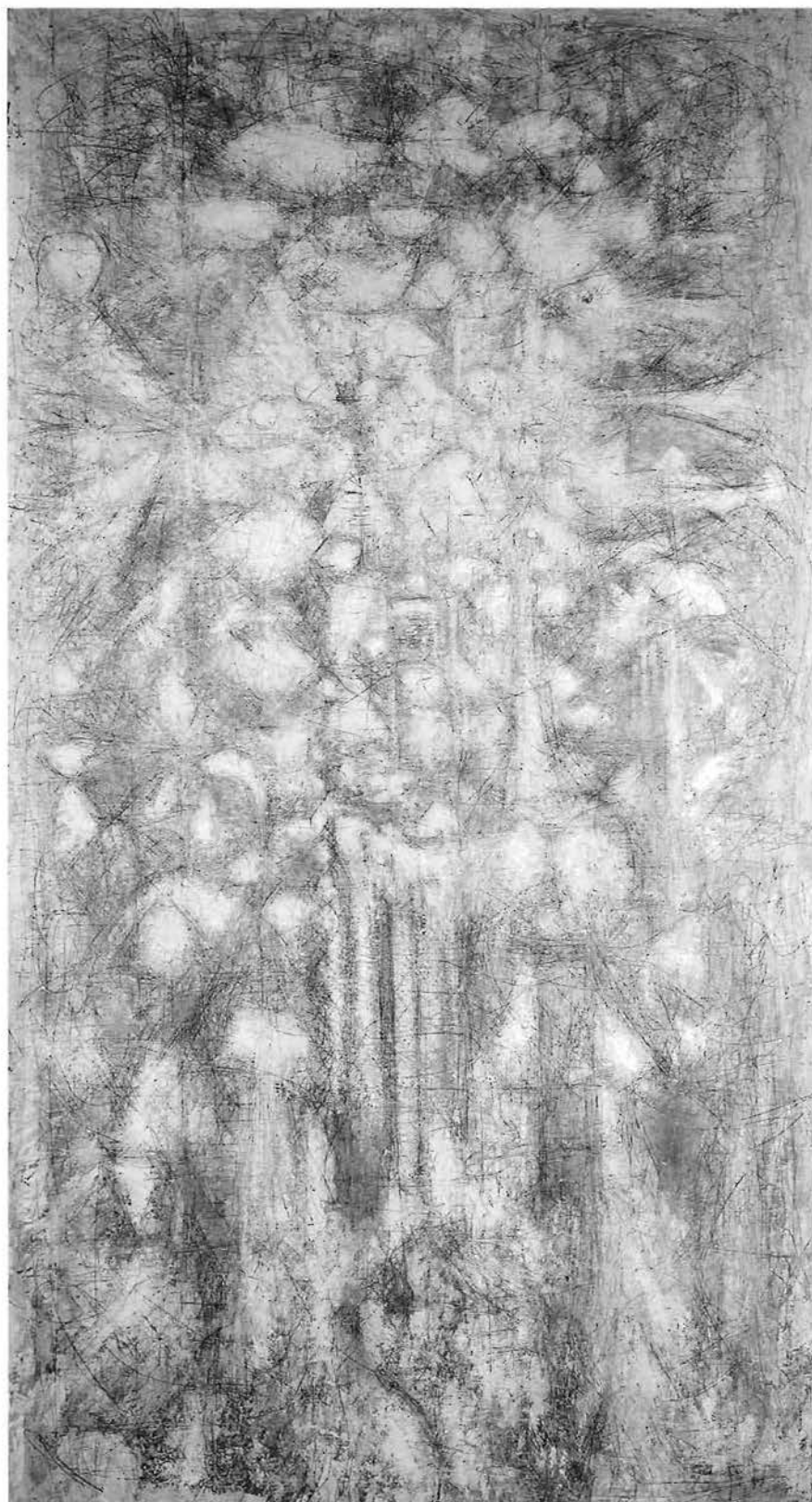
Transmuting the past and finding a way of invoking a positive new beginning is the subject of *Golden Dawn*, 1952 (74), a thinly painted work that combines areas of primed canvas with passages of drawing to suggest radiant images. The personages in *Golden Dawn* consist of a collection of bones assembled in such a way as to make them overlap and mirror one another. The reference to bones recalls the Surrealist sculptures of Herbert Ferber, David Hare, Isamu Noguchi, and David Smith, and it was anticipated in Pousette-Dart's own gouache *White Undulation* of 1941–43 (75). But instead of memorializing death and destruction, Pousette-Dart imbues his collection of skeletal parts with the power of regeneration and revelation. They awaken to the gold, silver, and white light of a new day, the "golden dawn" of the title. Luminous, unearthly, and radiant, the bones conjure up an image of life's numinous core, becoming emblems of resurrection and important symbols of postwar resolution for the conflict that many people, including the Abstract Expressionists and in particular Pousette-Dart, internalized in the 1940s.

*Golden Dawn* belongs to a group of postwar works emphasizing a pared-down formal approach. Pousette-Dart created a number of white paintings during this period that use the primed canvas together with delicate webs of graphite lines to suggest the unconscious as a fragile realm capable of registering the subtlest feelings and the most evanescent revelations. Even in *Chavade*, 1951 (76), in which white paint is worked into a dense relief, the artist abandons the heavy layers and dark tonalities of his art of the previous decade and creates luminous atmospheres by enveloping the painted surface in delicate drawing. The delicacy of white on white later serves as the basis for an entire body of graphite and acrylic works on paper, including *Silent Streams*, 1978 (77), *The White Spiral*, 1978 (78), and *White Arabesque*, 1977–78 (79). A late pastel variation on this theme is *Pale Garden*, 1980–81 (80).

73 *The Magnificent*, 1950–51  
Oil on canvas, 86 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 44 inches  
Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York  
Gift of Mrs. Ethel K. Schwabacher

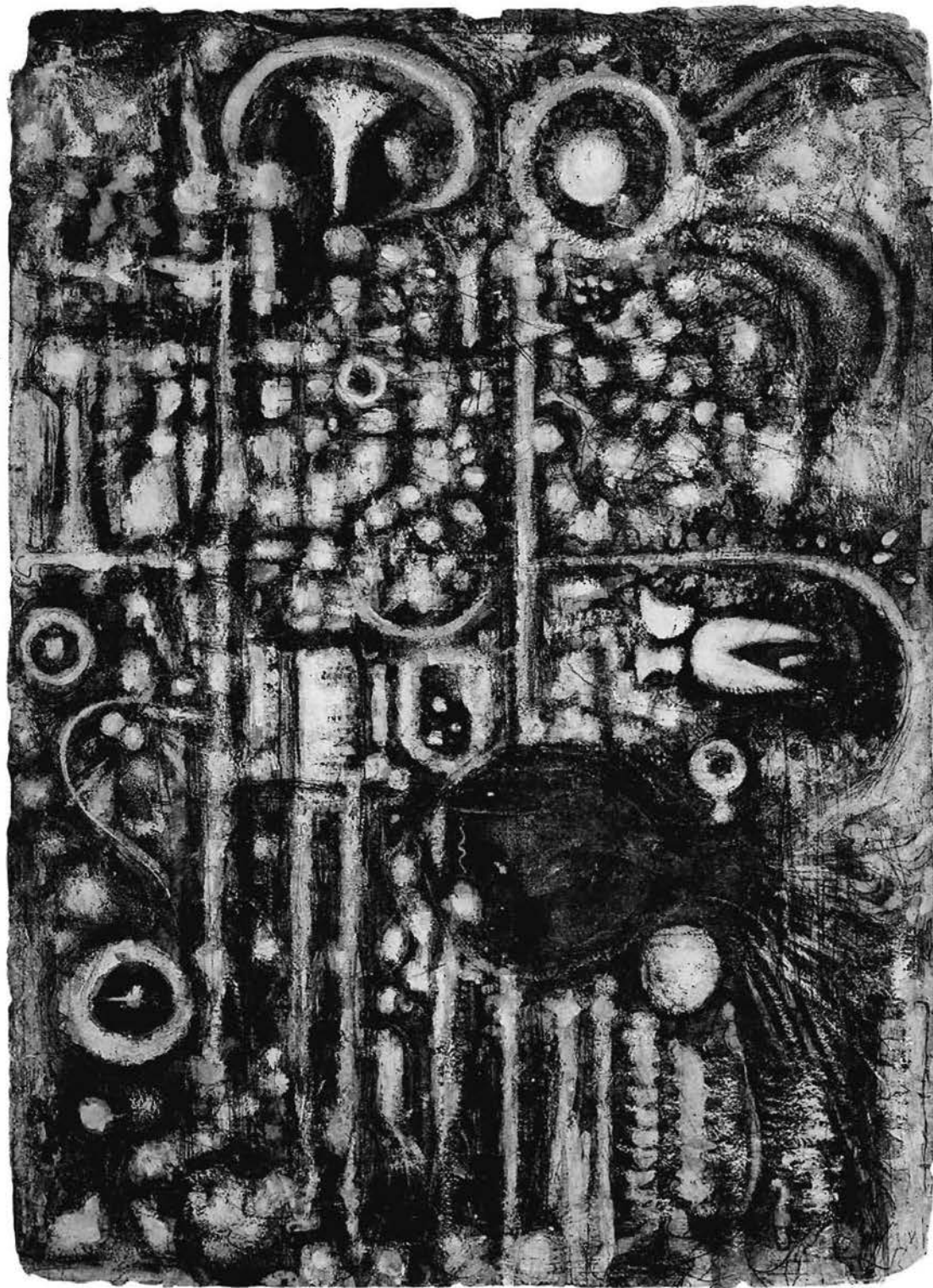


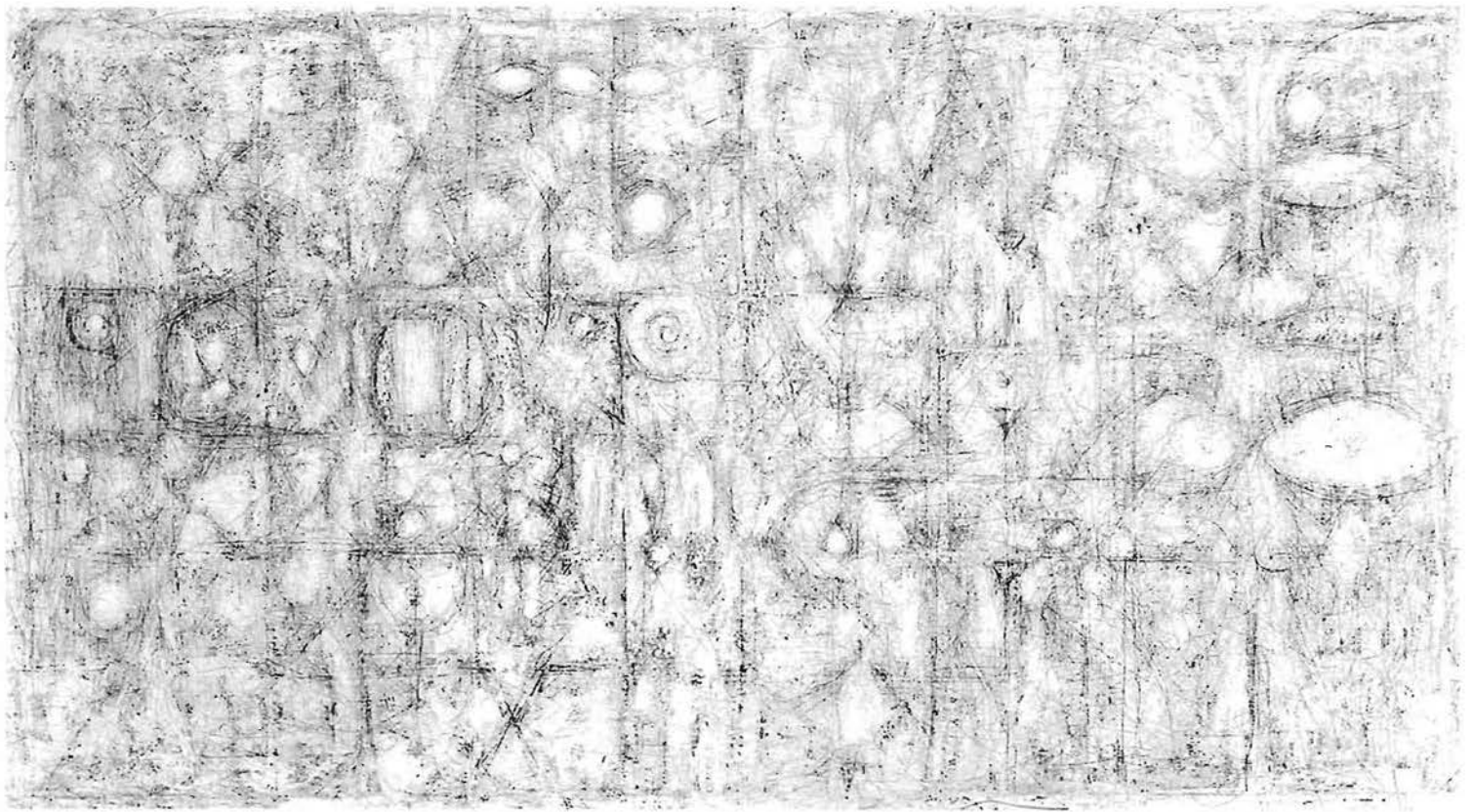
74 *Golden Dawn*, 1952  
Oil on linen,  
93½ x 51½ inches  
Collection of the artist



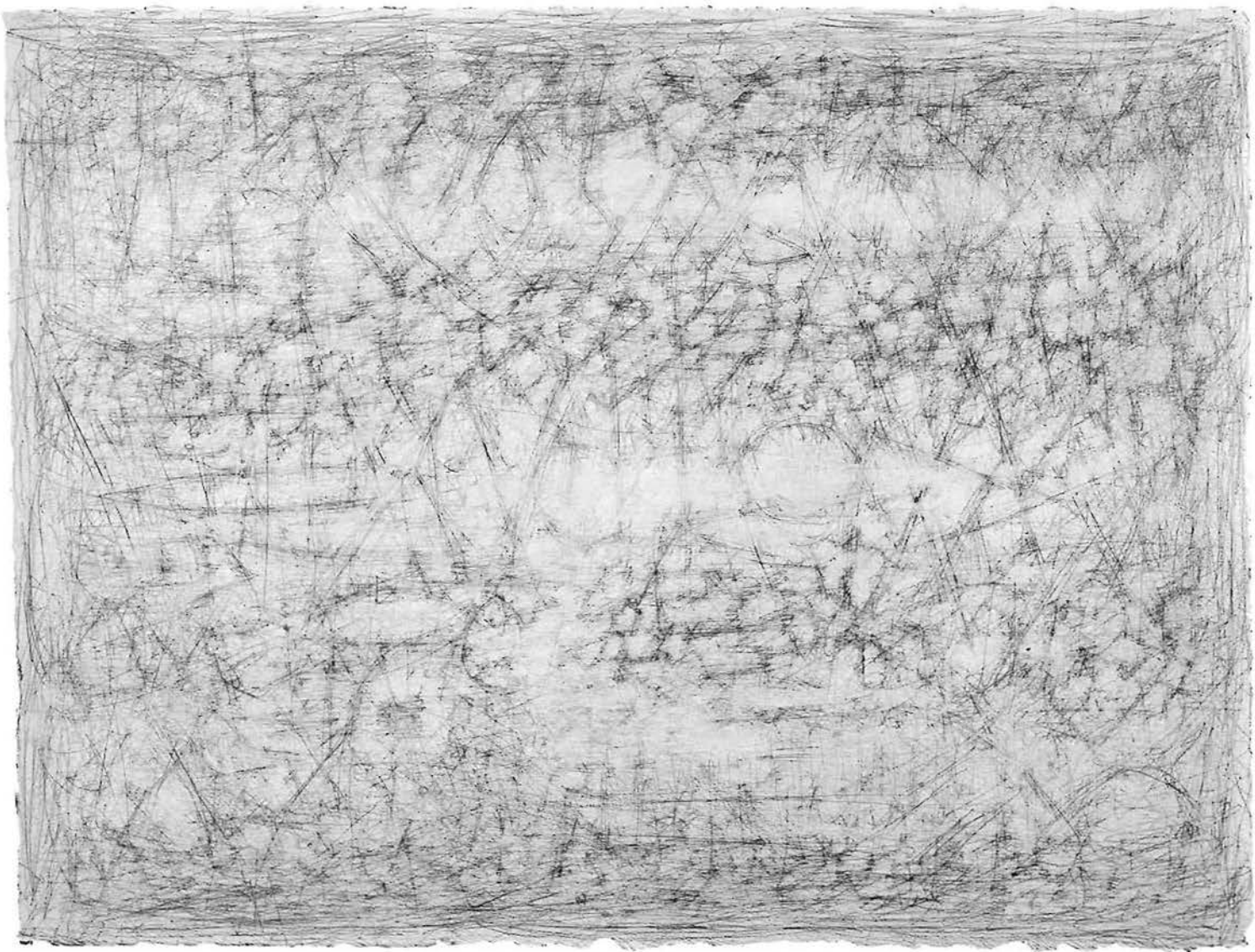


75 *White Undulation*, 1941–43  
Gouache on handmade paper,  
31½ x 23 inches  
Collection of the artist





76 *Chavade*, 1951  
Oil and pencil on canvas,  
53½ x 96½ inches  
The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York  
Philip Johnson Fund



77 *Silent Streams*, July 10, 1978  
Acrylic and graphite on  
handmade paper,  
23 x 30¼ inches  
Collection of the artist

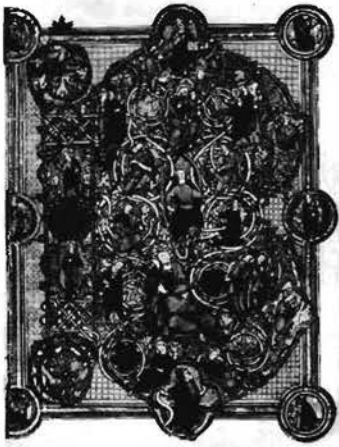
A number of paintings from the 1950s tantalize viewers with the impossibility of ever understanding them through rational analysis. They serve as Rorschachs for individual interpretation and present a key to their solution while still remaining ineluctable and chimerical. Plato described art as the mere shadow of objects that themselves are only reflections of an ultimate reality. If the illusions of art are only shadows of imitations of reality, Pousette-Dart seems to ask in *Shadow of the Unknown Bird*, 1955–58 (81), what will happen if people are presented with a shadow of something that is beyond the grasp of the conscious mind: the unknown bird, a symbol of the spirit which casts a shadow that is impossible to comprehend through rational means. Given the title as a guide, observers might be able to detect a bird's shadow in this painting; but if this strange creature—an upended triangle topped by a circle and two ovoids—is in fact the shadow of a bird, it belongs to a new order of being. Furthermore, there are hints of other birdlike creatures elsewhere in the painting. In this manner the work guides viewers into a richly ambiguous realm that awaits their imprimatur before it can begin to assume any reasonable order. The work thus demands observers' interpretations, which become self-fulfilling prophecies and which lead to the artist's professed goal of getting viewers to come to terms with themselves through art. "A painting is successful when I no longer know anything about it," Pousette-Dart has stated. "People must find their own experience in it. A significant painting must be pregnant with the possibility of contemplation so it can draw out of people the things they have in them."<sup>39</sup>

*Illumination Gothic*, 1958 (82), epitomizes Pousette-Dart's fascination with sacred traditions and spirituality in modern life. Gothic illuminated manuscripts serve as a subtext for this and other works such as *White Gothic Number 4*, 1959 (83). The viewers' understanding of *Illumination Gothic* is enhanced if they consider it in relation to the intricate designs of elaborate initials used to introduce Gothic manuscripts. Conceived in rich colors with a lavish amount of gold leaf, the trailing vinelike patterns that encircle charming vignettes of biblical figures in medieval manuscripts attest to the beauty, intimacy, formality, and humanity of the sacred. Gothic illumination is found in Bibles and psalters that were carried to religious services. Although they were not always used by pious individuals, and frequently became sumptuous objects of conspicuous display for members of the nobility, they were intended to shed light on the meaning of

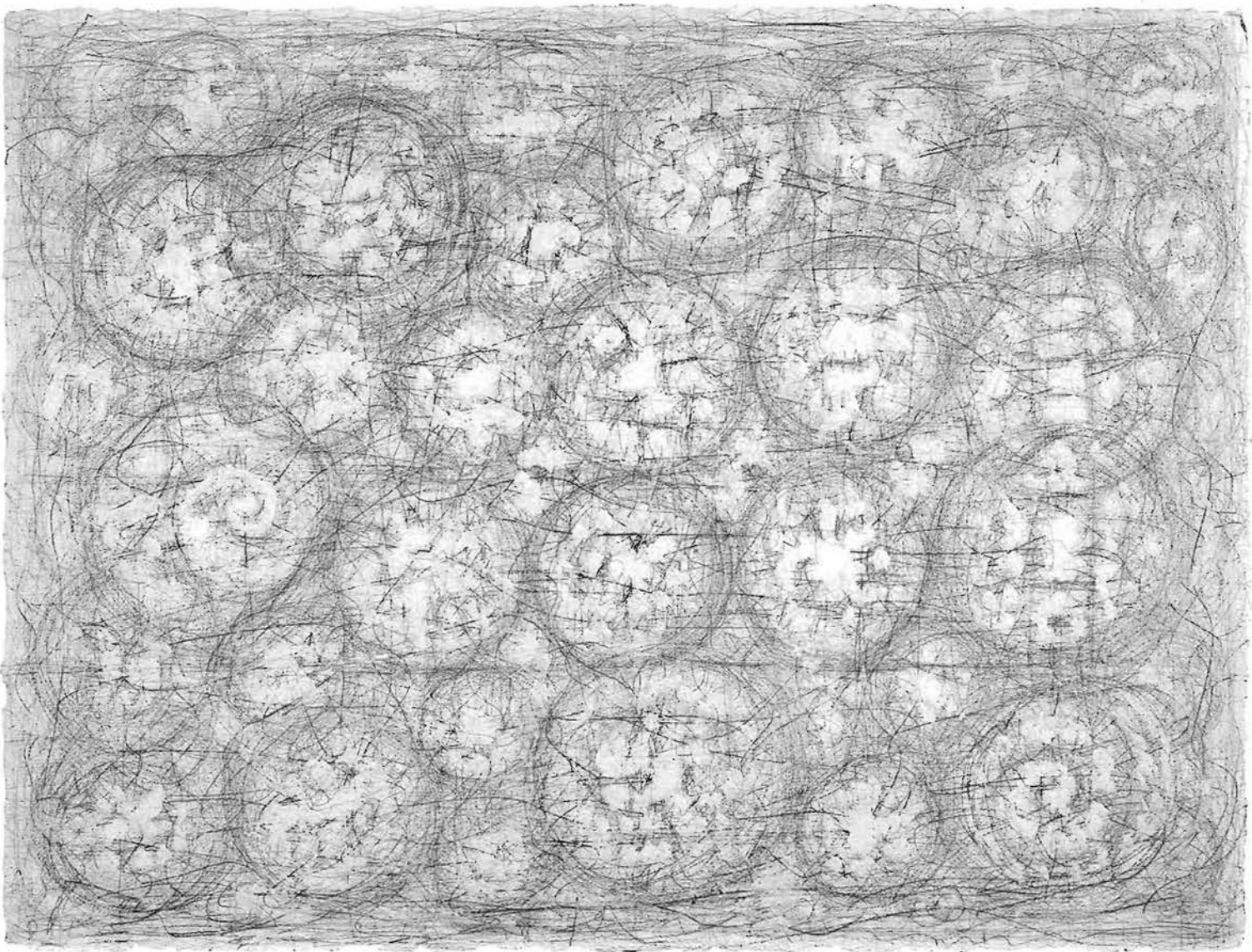
sacred texts. This idea of illuminating the sacred is important for Pousette-Dart's painting, which presents five hieratic figures against a radiating gold background. The symbolic role of these abstract totemic figures is indicated by their lack of solidity: at their base they dissolve into rivulets of Abstract Expressionist drips. The five figures serve as a spiritual scaffolding for a richly encrusted and elaborately worked surface with jewel-like ovoids, circles, and diamonds. They serve much the same function as elaborate Gothic initials, which introduce and designate a page of text as special and sacred. The Gothic decoration announces the privileged point of view of the religious devotee in much the same manner as *Illumination Gothic* announces the sacred work of creative self-discovery that the artist intends people to enact in the process of comprehending his abstract composition.

Not content to deal with the sacred in positive terms, Pousette-Dart created an inversion of *Illumination Gothic* in *Blood Wedding* (84), a brutal work in which the red paint looks like blood and the personages specters. The painting was given its title by the artist's wife, Evelyn, a poet who frequently collaborates with him on titling his works. Although Pousette-Dart believes that the title, which refers to the Federico Garcia Lorca play, may have more meaning for Evelyn than for him, he accepted it because it conjures up the idea of dark, brooding primordial forces that have their origins in the unconscious mind and that affect people in disturbing and surprising ways.

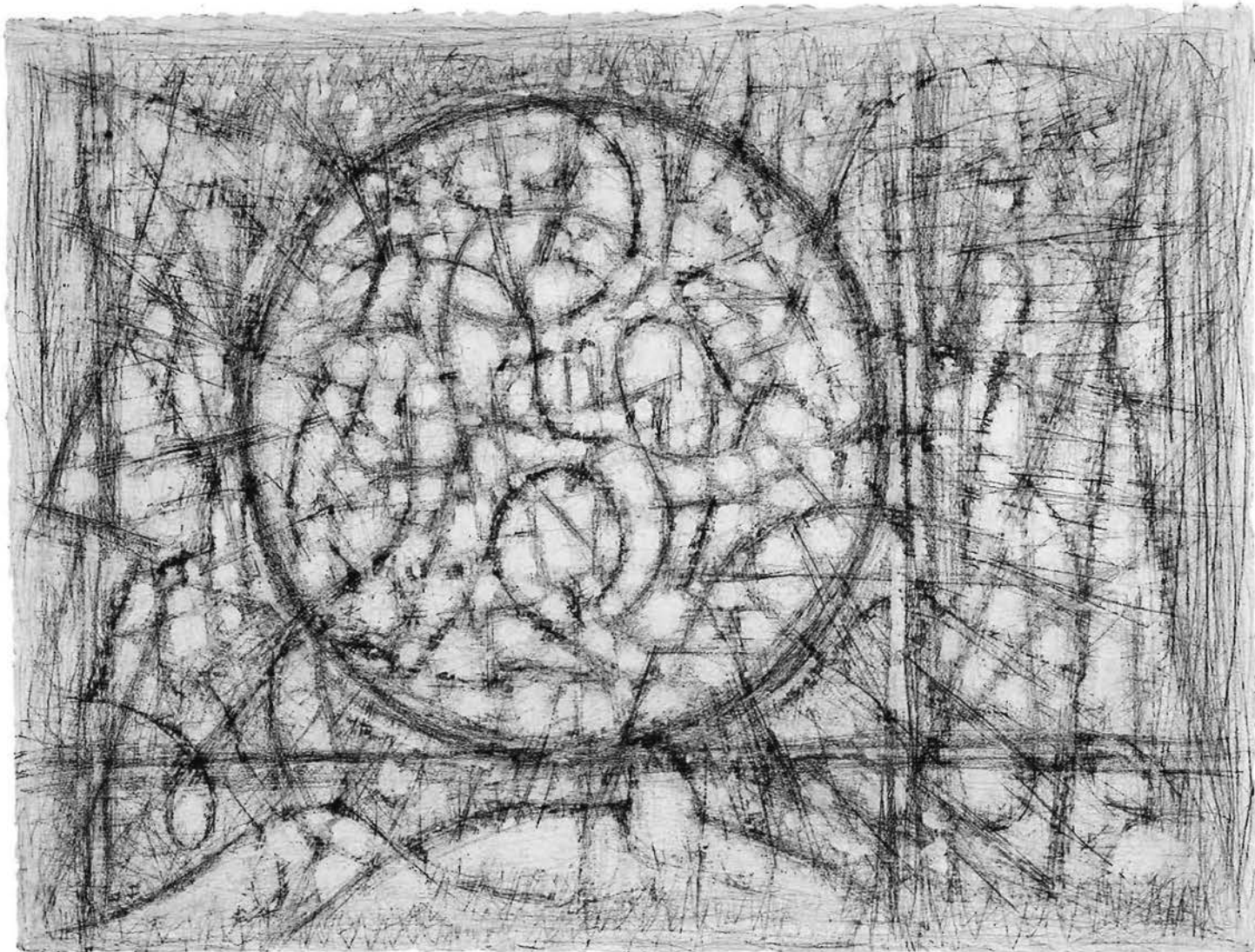
The transition from the 1950s to the 1960s is attended by a greater reliance on abstraction and an interest in all-over compositions that veer away from the fluctuant stage settings populated with figures that characterize many earlier works. The changes occurring in Pousette-Dart's art in the 1960s reflect his reevaluation of Impressionism, which had important personal associations since his father had worked in an Impressionist manner. As recently as the 1940s Impressionism was considered a period style that was outside the bounds of modernism. In the 1950s when The Museum of Modern Art acquired several Impressionist works for its permanent collection, the critic Clement Greenberg began to laud its formal advances, and vanguard artists as different as Sam Francis, Philip Guston, Morris Louis, and Barnett Newman found its formal devices worth borrowing. Although he employed an almost Impressionist sense of color in *The Magnificent*,



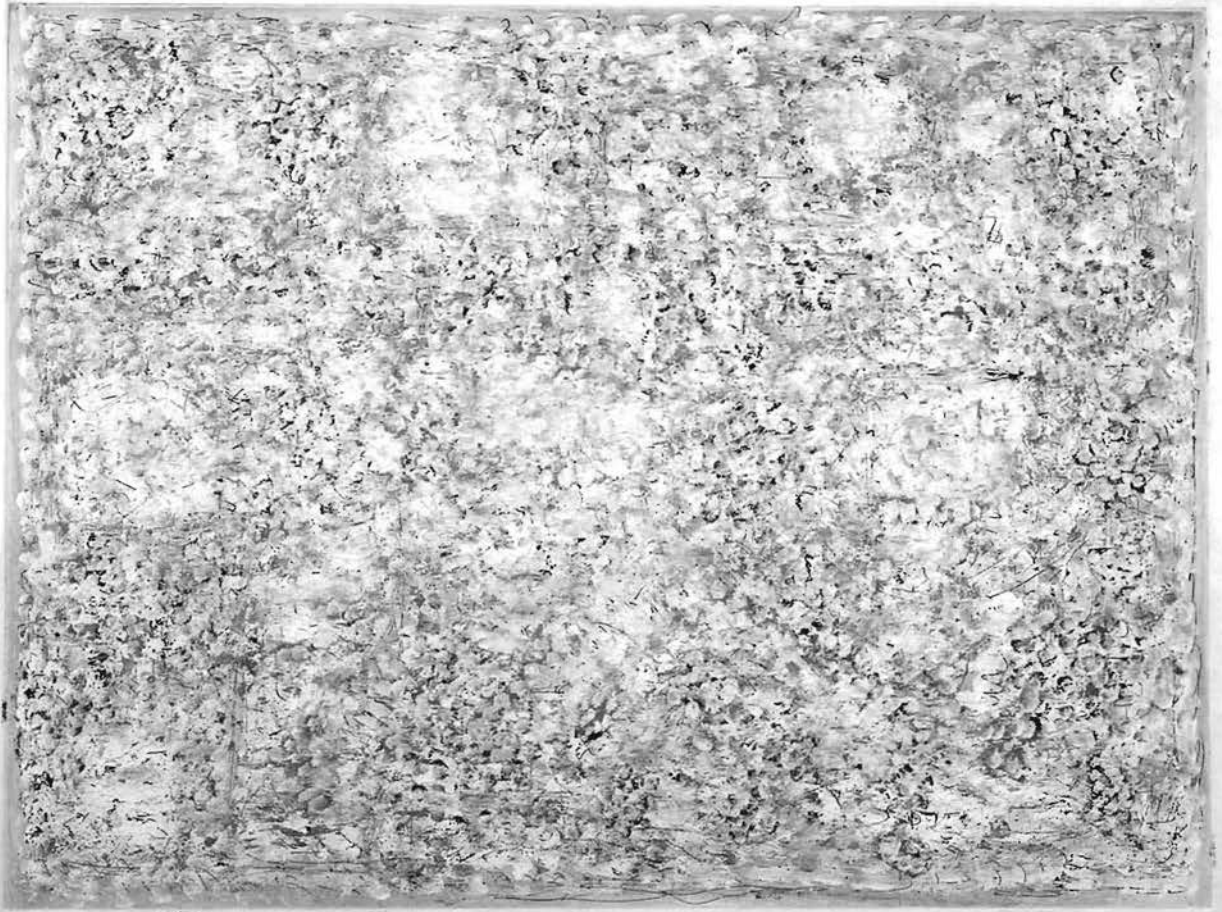
Page from *The Windmill Psalter*, 13th century. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. M102 f. lv. © The Pierpont Morgan Library 1990. Gothic manuscript illumination serves as a subtext for Pousette-Dart's meditations on the Gothic theme in such works as *Illumination Gothic* and *White Gothic Number 4*.



78 *The White Spiral*, 1978  
Acrylic and graphite on  
handmade paper,  
22 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 30 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches  
Collection of the artist

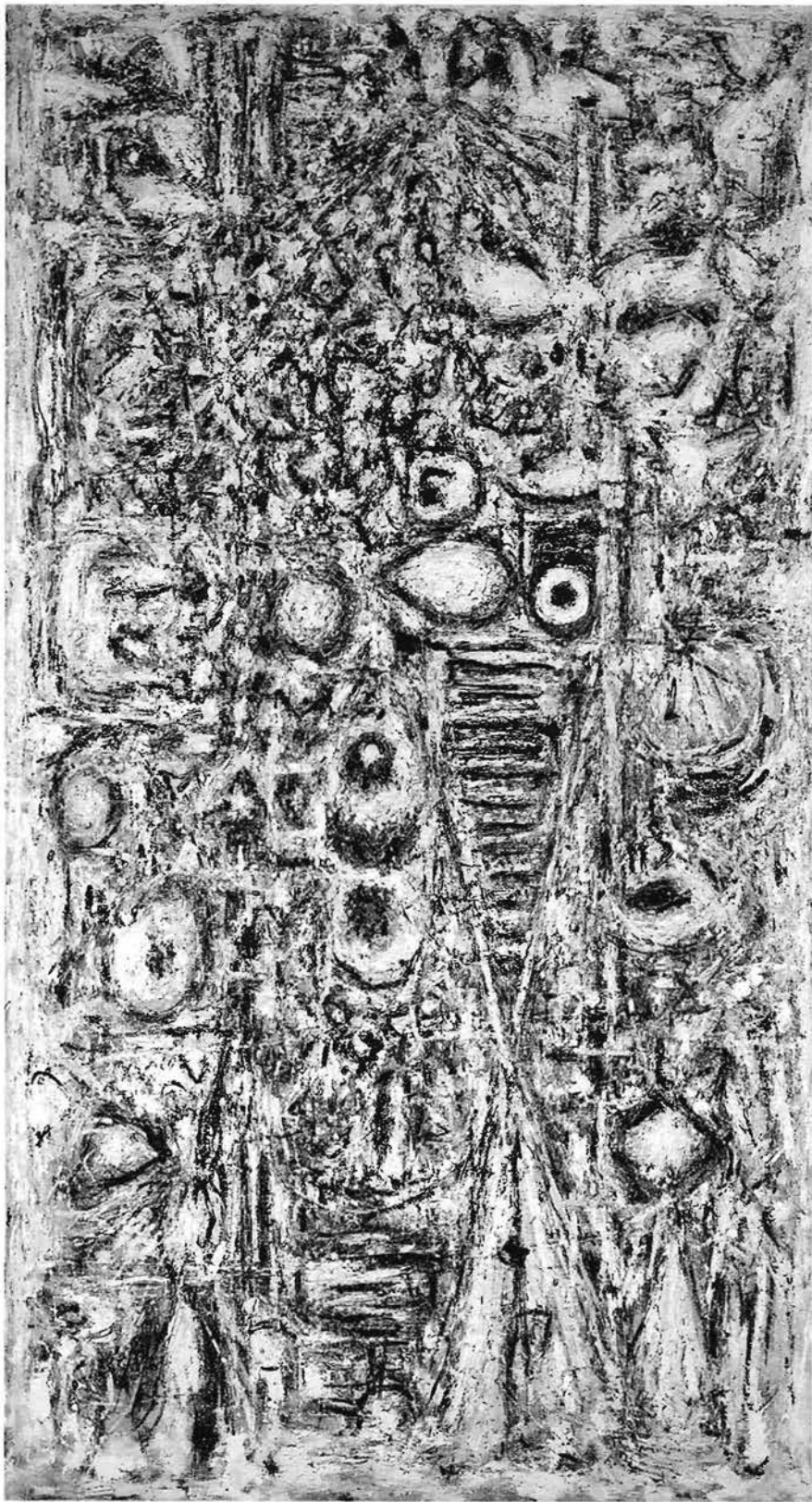


79 *White Arabesque*, May 1977  
(reworked 1978)  
Acrylic, graphite, and gesso on  
handmade paper,  
22 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 30 inches  
Collection of the artist



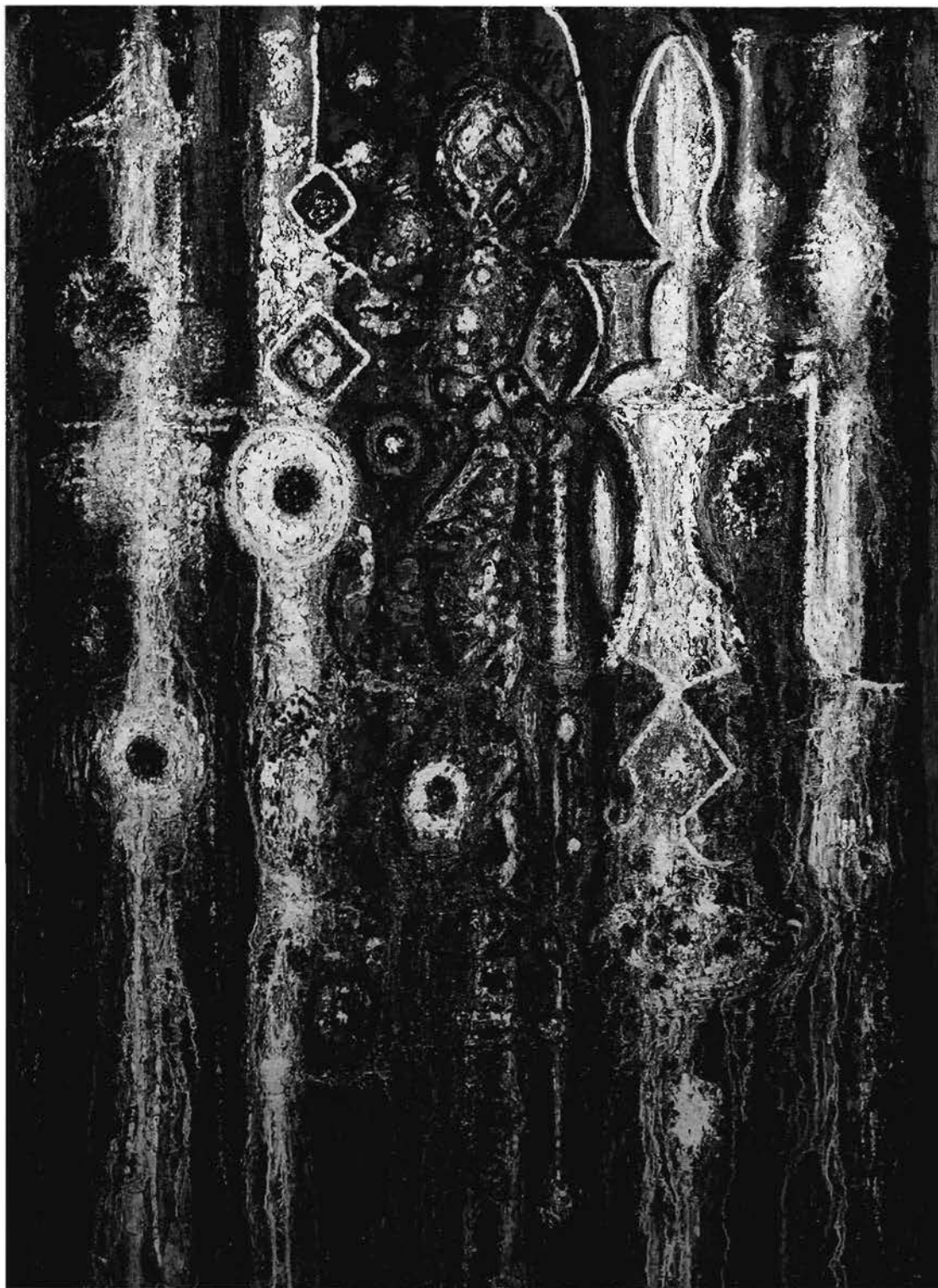
80 *Pale Garden*, 1980–81  
Mixed media on paper;  
hand-colored etching,  
17 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 23 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches  
Collection of the artist

81 *Shadow of the Unknown*  
*Bird*, 1955-58  
Oil on linen,  
95½ x 52½ inches  
Collection of the artist

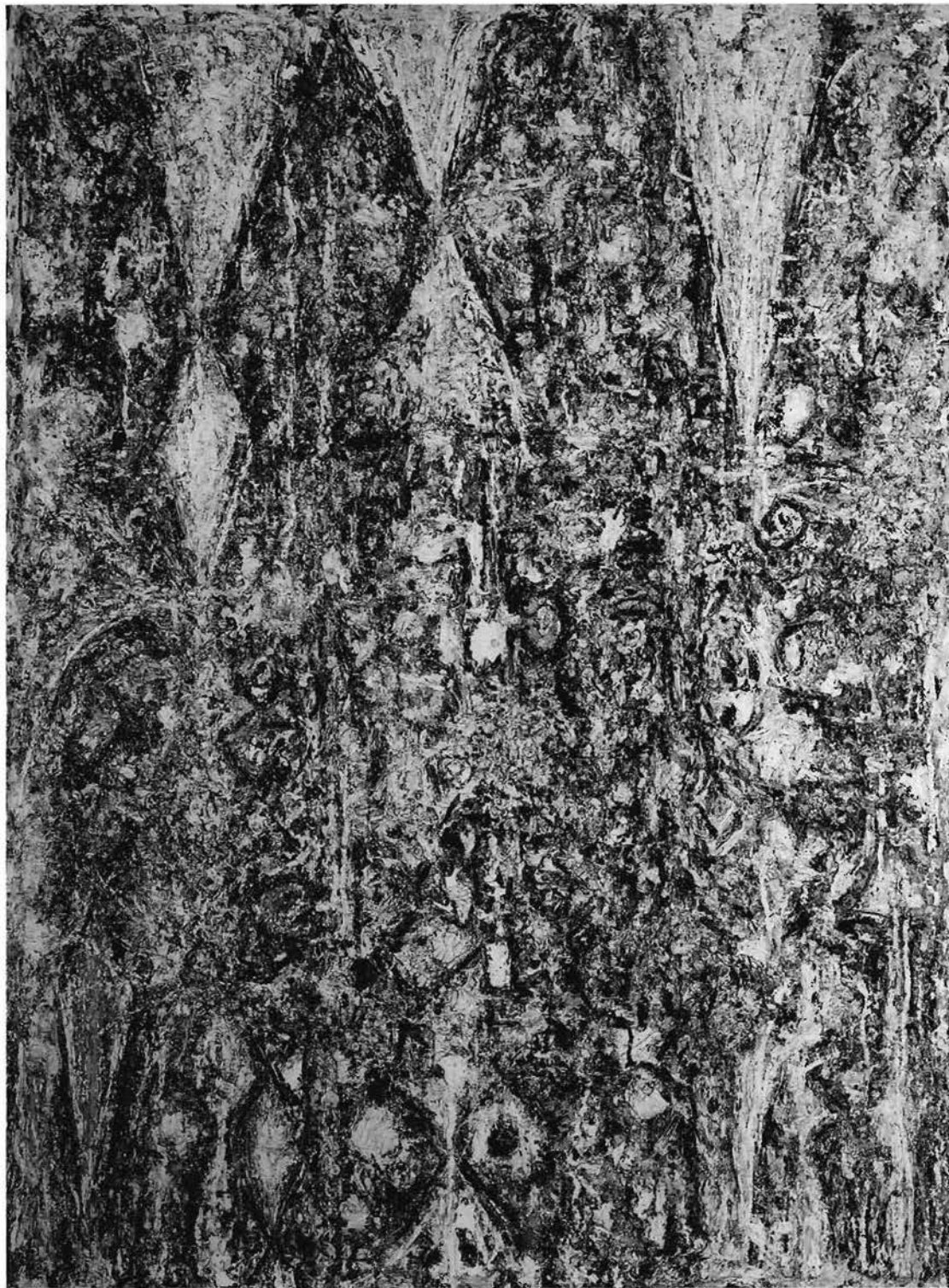


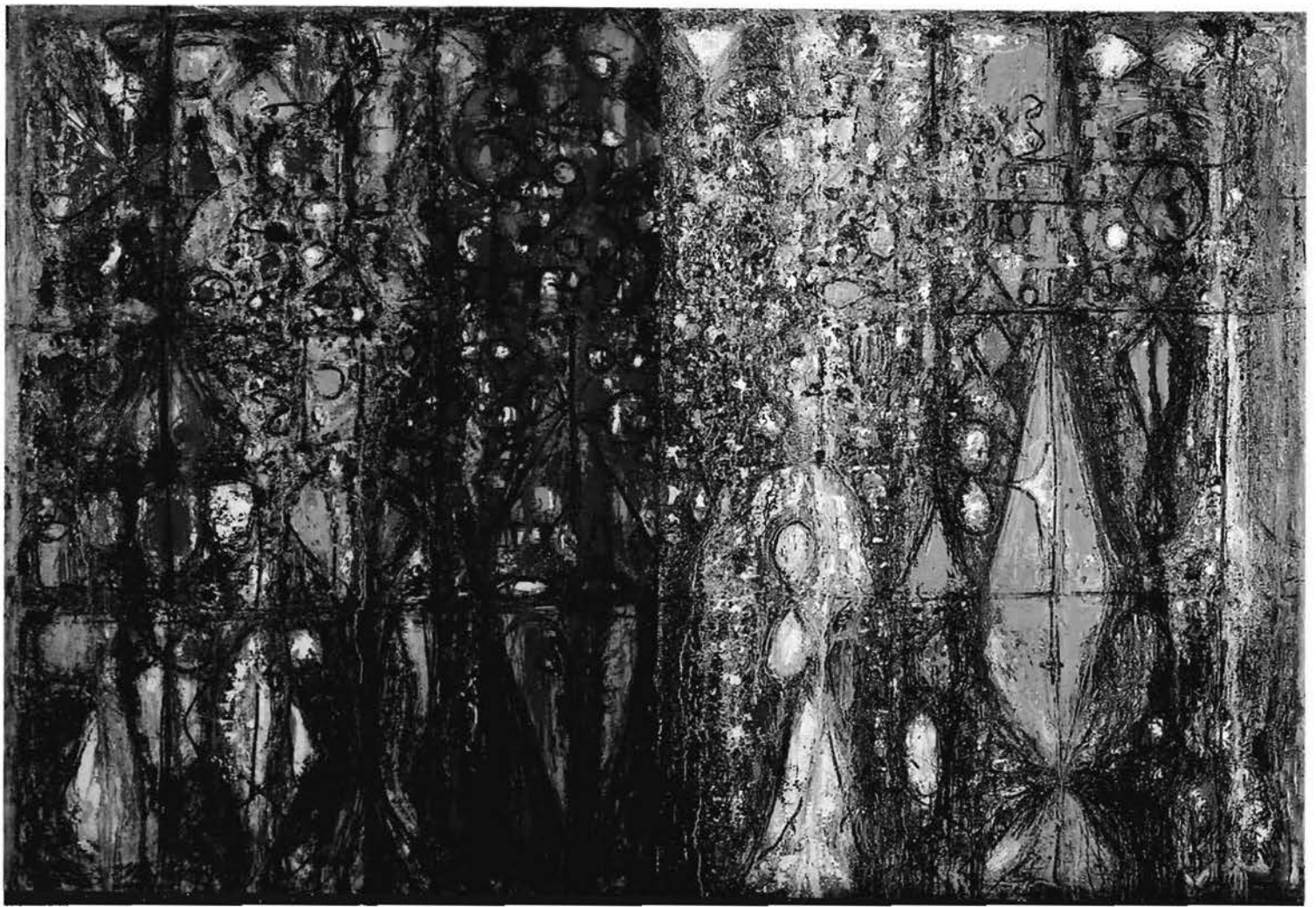


82 *Illumination Gothic*, 1958  
Oil on linen, 72 x 53½ inches  
Private Collection

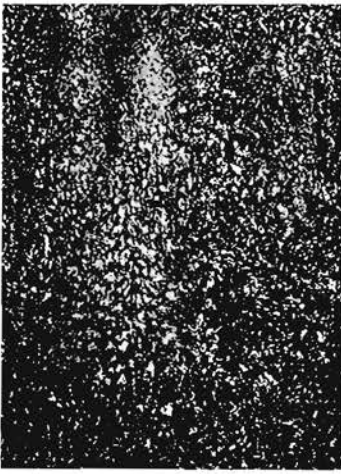


83 *White Gothic Number 4*, 1959  
Oil on linen, 75 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 57 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches  
Private Collection





84 *Blood Wedding*, 1958  
Oil on linen, 72 x 112 inches  
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur  
E. Kahn, New York



Richard Pousette-Dart, *In the Garden*, 1960. Oil on linen, 75½ x 56 inches. Collection of the artist.

Pousette-Dart waited for a number of years until he had thoroughly investigated the idea of abstract personages, together with the formal vocabulary of drips and gestural drawing with paint, before he began using Impressionist elements in his art to evoke an expanded sense of spirituality. From the claustrophobic interior spaces of the 1940s to the fluctuant stage settings of the 1950s, he moved to atmospheric spaces that begin to embrace the cosmos. As soon as he recognized that broken color and fractured brush strokes atomize reality, Pousette-Dart had to relinquish the quasi-figurative elements that had populated his canvases since the 1930s and to accept increased abstraction in his work.

Although he acquainted himself with the formal advantages of Impressionism, he did not use them in a traditional manner to depict landscapes. Like other Abstract Expressionists, he created an inscape rather than a landscape, a work of art that turns in on itself and presents a viewer with an essential identity rather than a mere transcription of visual appearance.<sup>40</sup> The inscape of a landscape would take into consideration an artist's feelings about the scene as well as the available formal means for manifesting these feelings. While a landscape might serve as a catalyst for a painting, the feelings manifested within the limits of the chosen medium would be the subject of an inscape. Pousette-Dart was careful to note the differences between external nature and the reality of his work, or the differences between landscape and inscape. In 1954 he wrote, "Art is not a mirror reflecting other life as was much artifice of the past but is the very being of nature itself we are not watching the water nor describing it we are in it."<sup>41</sup> When John I. H. Baur, then director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, organized the exhibition *Nature in Abstraction*, he asked a number of artists, including Pousette-Dart, to comment on their attitudes toward nature. Because Pousette-Dart's response clearly articulates his position on the type of nature germane to his art, it is worth quoting in its entirety:

*The only relationship of my painting to nature is simply through me as a mystical part of nature and the universe. My work and my work alone defines my relationship to nature.*

*A work of art for me is a window, a touchstone or doorway to every other human being. It is my contact and union with the universe.*

*Art is not a mirror reflecting nature, but is the very essence of man's aesthetic, imaginative experience.*

*Art transcends, transforms nature, creates a nature beyond nature, a supra nature, a thing in itself—its own nature, answering the deep need of man's imaginative and aesthetic being.*

*Nature does not satisfy art, but art satisfies nature. Nature is dumb, while art is conscious, articulate, and triumphant.*<sup>42</sup>

The nature Pousette-Dart depicts is his own; his reality depends on his feelings about the world.

Some of Pousette-Dart's first experiments with an Impressionist technique confound everyday experience of space as they appear to be both open and closed at the same time. *In the Garden*, 1960, might refer to an actual garden; however, the work hovers between external, atmospheric space and a protected internal realm. Both soothing and puzzling, the painting comes closest to Claude Monet's expressionist works of the 1880s in its thick coruscations of paint and to his late waterlily paintings in its abstraction. *In the Garden* has dissolved form into both light and paint, and the former is as ephemeral as the latter is dense and impenetrable. Both serve to express the artist's inscape by manifesting his feelings in paint, light, and color rather than imitating the appearances of the external world.

A similar interest in an inscape is apparent in *Sky Presence (Morning)*, 1962–63 (101), in which outer space becomes a metaphor for the artist's interior space. Changing morning light in the form of aureoles of violet, red, and yellow enliven this all-over composition that seems to engulf observers. Because the work is conceived without a dominant focal point, it encourages viewers to emphasize their peripheral vision. Rather than focusing on individual elements, they tend to treat the canvas as an all-over embracing environment. Whereas focused scrutiny requires observers' conscious attention, peripheral vision is more closely aligned to a subconscious apprehension of the world, in which objects and forms are not subjected to the critical inquiry of the conscious mind. By inducing viewers to relax and be surrounded by forms, Pousette-Dart sets up a meditative situation whereby people begin to be aware of a less restrictive field of vision than that to which they are normally accustomed. In this manner he entices viewers to come to terms with a visual field that is a metaphor for the subconscious mind, and thus he creates a perceptual equivalent to chaos.<sup>43</sup>

In *Awakening Earth*, 1962–63 (85), Pousette-Dart similarly invokes nature without limiting himself to describing it. He may have been thinking of this work when he reflected:

*If you continue [working] long enough, you start to see things, and then you bring them out. But you don't necessarily have to. It's like taking a piece of earth and dancing on it so long that it starts to live under your feet. You find there are subtle things that you keep repeating and that start to beat forms or that start to make an iconography or start to make a structure—or you can bring it out.*<sup>44</sup>

The painting serves as a mandala of becoming since it oscillates between a centered and an all-over composition. The brush strokes and individual daubs of paint in *Awakening Earth* never coalesce; they continue to vibrate, endowing this work with enormous energy. These pulsating rhythms suggest more than the dawn of the new season, spring; they create an image of new birth, a metaphor of being. This image of new birth assumed even more cosmic associations in *Presence, Genesis*, 1975 (86). Paralleling the brushwork of *Awakening Earth* but much more centered is a group of small studies exemplified by *Radiance, Blue Circle*, 1960 (87).

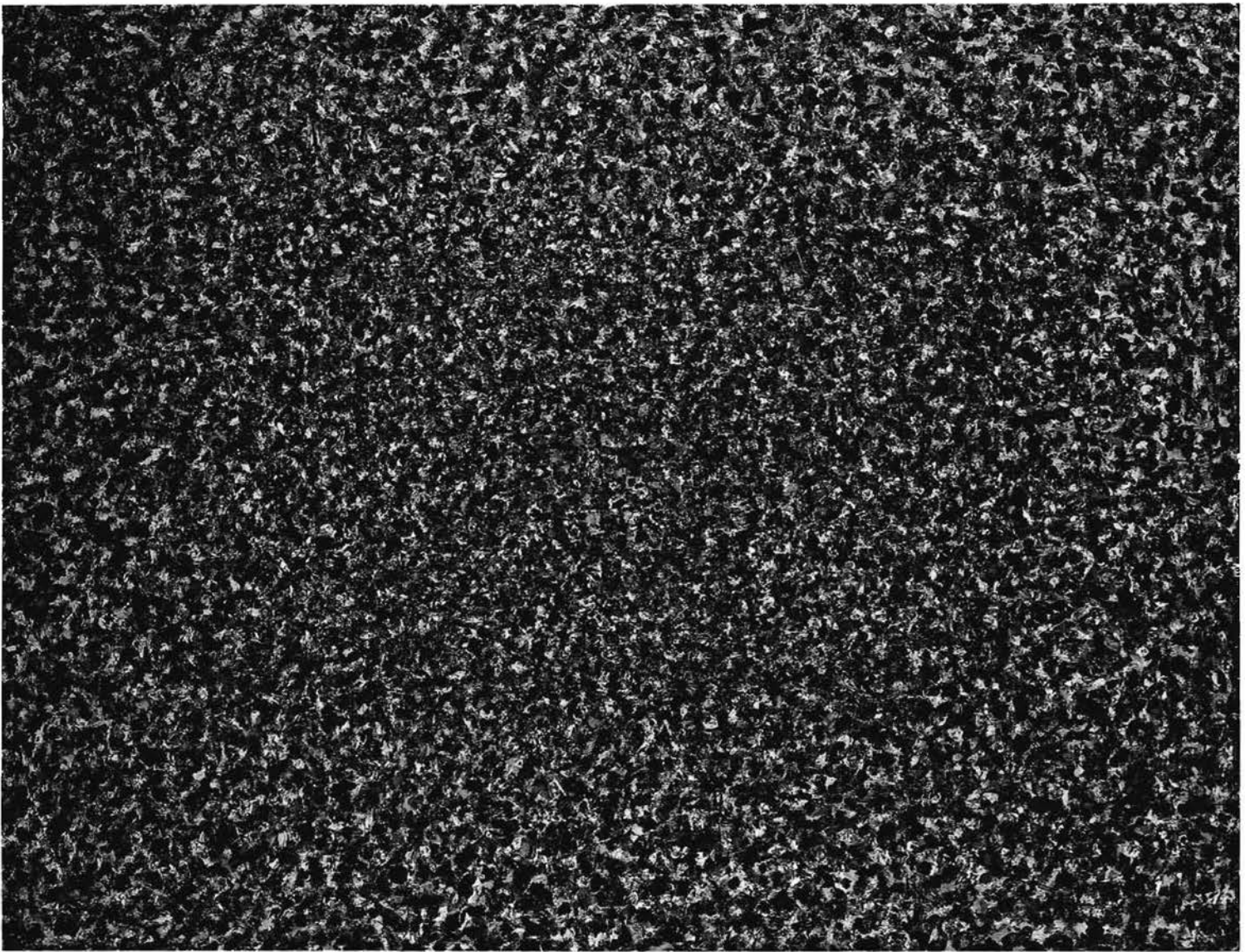
The transition from references to gardens and earth to analogies of cosmic realms is effortless and natural for Pousette-Dart, who had suggested aspects of both the microcosm and the macrocosm in such paintings of the 1940s as *The Edge*, in which machines, clouds, and planets collide in a grand and mysterious metaphysical realm. The critic Hilton Kramer was among the first to note Pousette-Dart's interest in the cosmos in the 1960s in his review "Art: Spirit and Substance" for the November 18, 1967, *New York Times*:

*The artist's imagery has changed over the years, where in the past it was more earthbound, it has now become almost literally focused on the heavens, with a hint of sensuous, celestial light as its principal concern. But his essential purposes have remained the same—to make of painting a highly personal record of a spiritual state.*

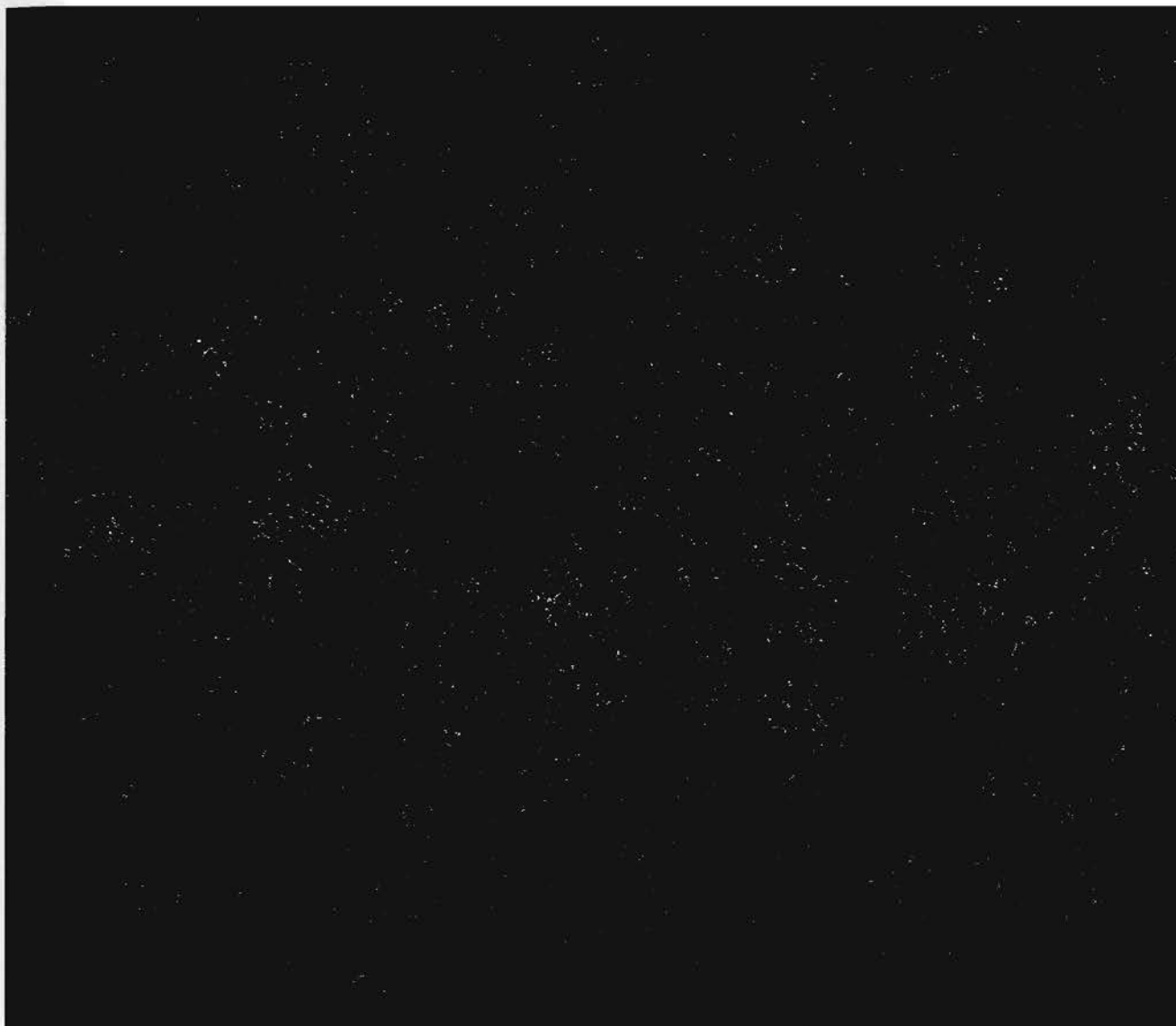
The impetus to employ an iconography of outer space no doubt derived from the emerging space program of the United States. The exploration of outer space soon became an important way of gauging the country's scientific lead over its Cold War opponent the Soviet Union. It also captured the imagination of the shrinking world, which Marshall McLuhan was appropriately calling a "global village."

Just as the atom had its artistic equivalents in George Nelson's clocks, Pollock's drip paintings, and Pousette-Dart's own works of the 1940s, so the space age spawned such forms as the Hoover Constellation vacuum cleaner, Robert Smithson's Non-sites, Robert Rosenquist's *F-111*, and Pousette-Dart's *Imploding Light Number 2*, 1968–69 (104), *Presence Number 3, Black*, 1969 (88), and *Radiance*, 1973–74 (89). *Imploding Light Number 2* and *Presence Number 3, Black* might well refer to a black hole in space, but given Pousette-Dart's history and interests, black holes could also be space-age mandalas of the unconscious mind. *Hieroglyph Number 2, Black*, 1973–74 (105), appears to picture the universe as an infinity of galaxies and suggests that the self is the last frontier, as unlimited as the cosmos. *Radiance* joins together the poetry of late-nineteenth-century French Neo-Impressionism with the traditional religious imagery of a triptych and the imagery of outer space. This work also presents an almost myopic look at individual brush strokes that separate and atomize forms, causing them to be seen against light or dark backgrounds that heighten their intensity. In *Radiance* Pousette-Dart complements his cosmic imagery with spirals, foliate shapes, and forms that resemble some of the birds, eyes, eggs, and unicellular creatures of the 1940s. In this way he reverses the use of his earlier imagery: here he embeds elements of the microcosm in the macrocosm to suggest that a living spirit encompasses infinity as well as minuscule forms. His attitude is apparent in the richly textured, multidimensional *Celebration, Birth*, 1975–76 (37), with its festive display of fireworks and streamers made up of whirling cosmic forms liberally mixed with quivering microscopic life. In this work chaos is described most positively as part of the celebration of the new self that will emerge out of the dissolution of the old and the immersion in the new free-flowing realm of limitless possibilities.

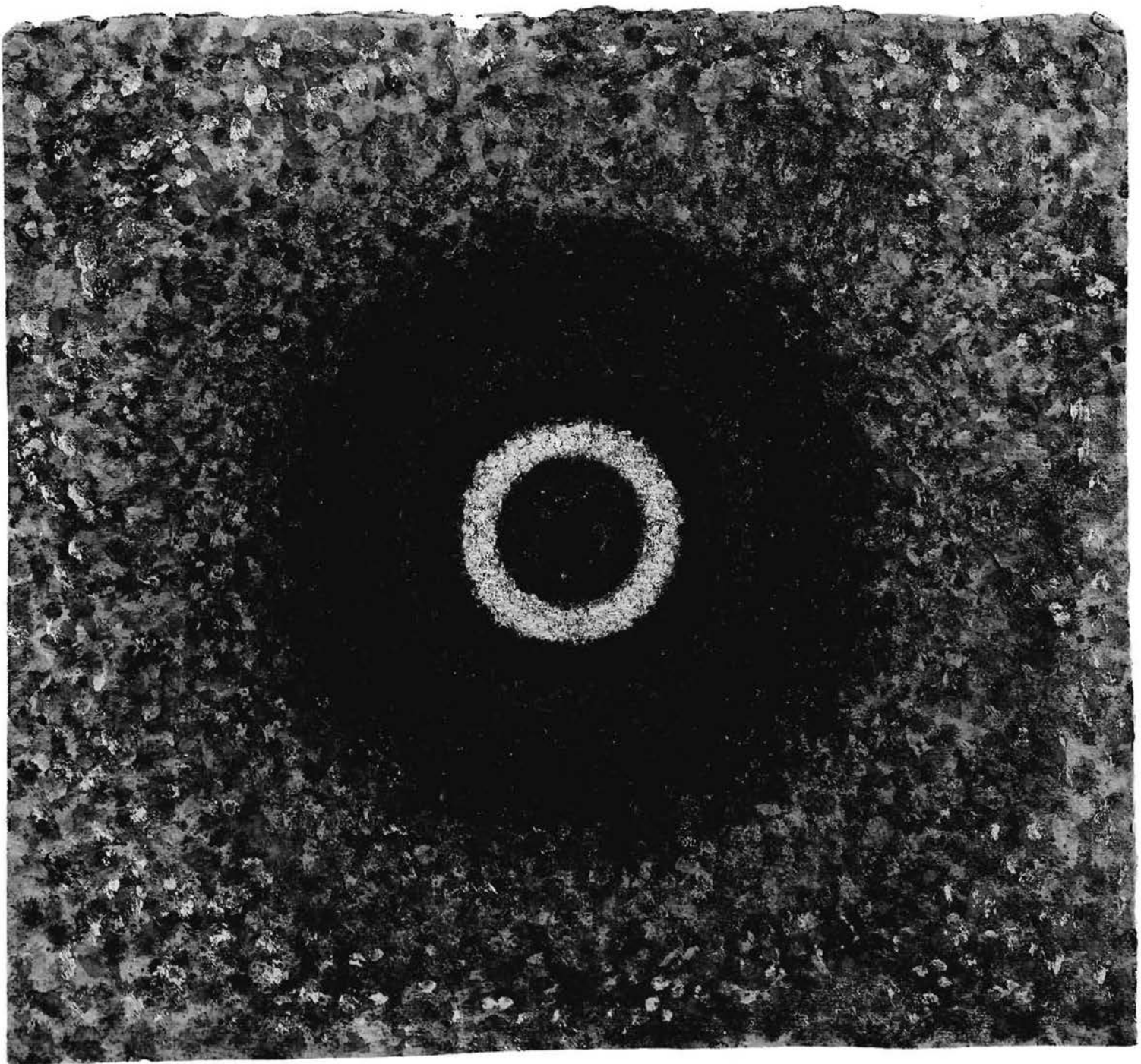
At the time he created *Radiance*, Pousette-Dart was working on a triptych for the North Central Bronx Hospital. *Presence, Healing Circles*, 1973–74 (90), consists of three almost identical spheres that look as if they are being seen either under a microscope or through a powerful telescope. The microcosm becomes equivalent to the macrocosm, and the double perspective invites the viewer's close scrutiny of the relationship between inner and outer space. *Presence, Healing Circles* joins the cosmic image of a planet with teeming life seen through the microscope to suggest the life force pervading the



85 *Awakening Earth*, 1962-63  
Oil on canvas, 43 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 57 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Private Collection

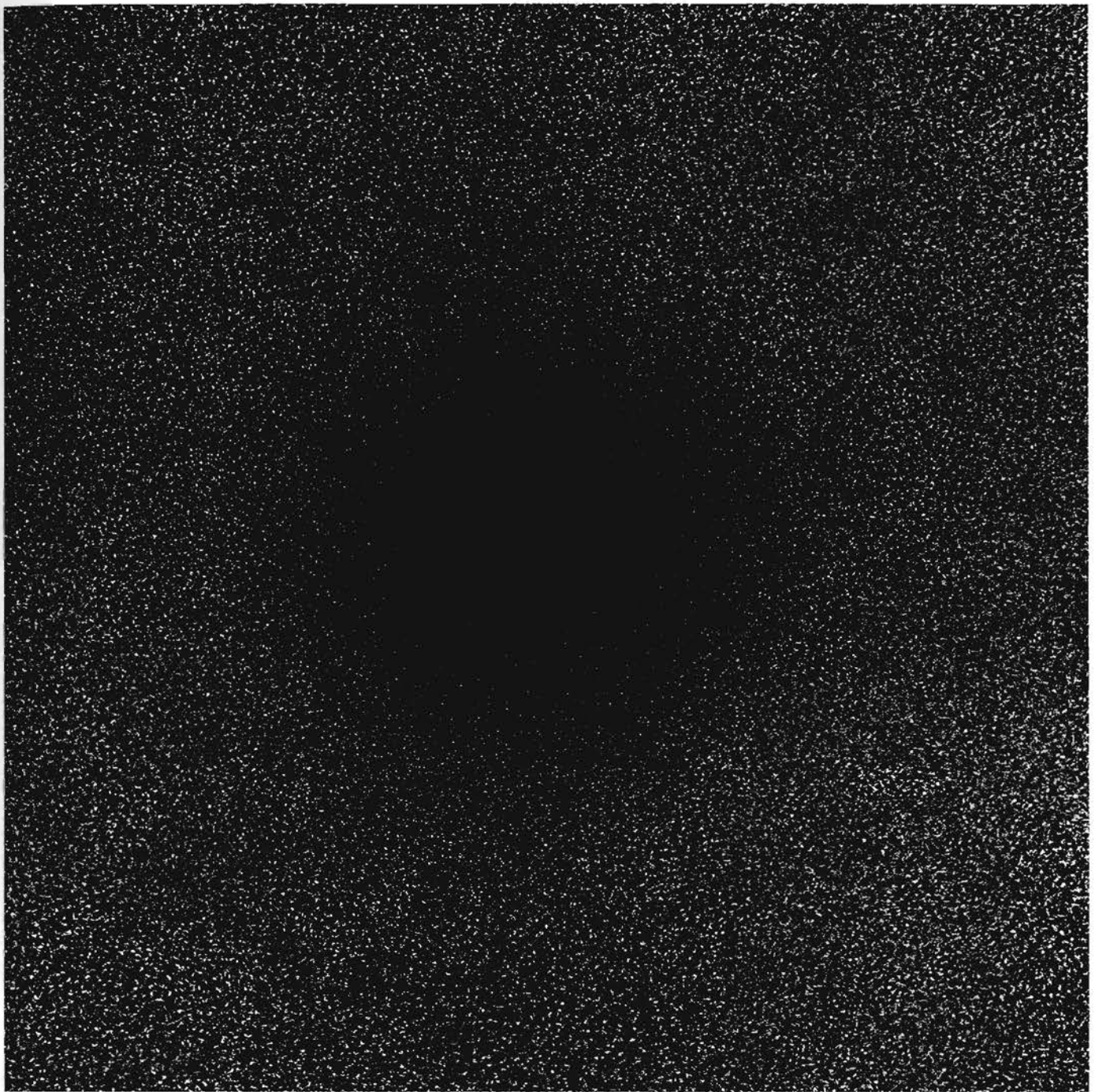


86 *Presence, Genesis*, 1975  
Acrylic on canvas, 96 x 111 inches  
Collection of the artist



87 *Radiance, Blue Circle*, 1960  
Oil on paper, 11¼ x 12¼ inches  
Collection of the artist

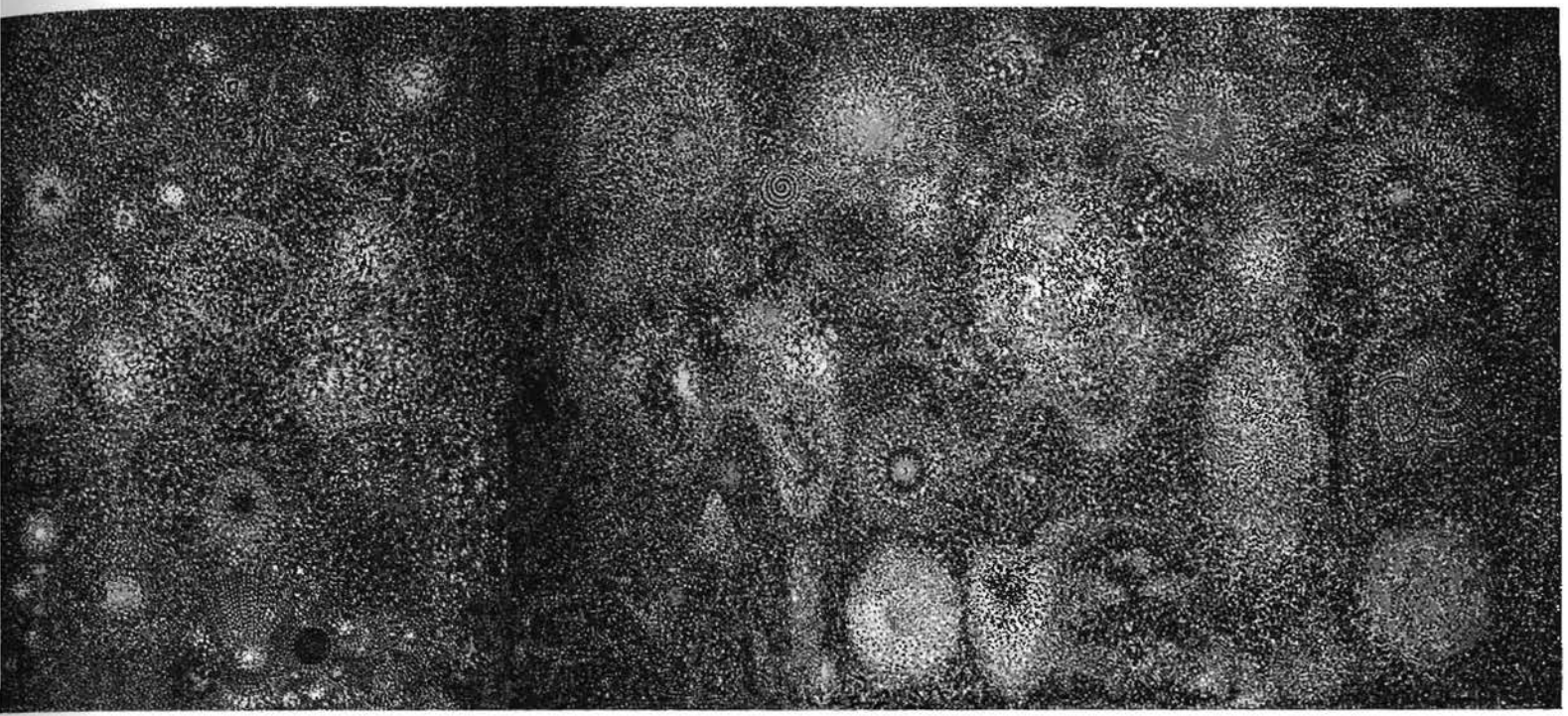


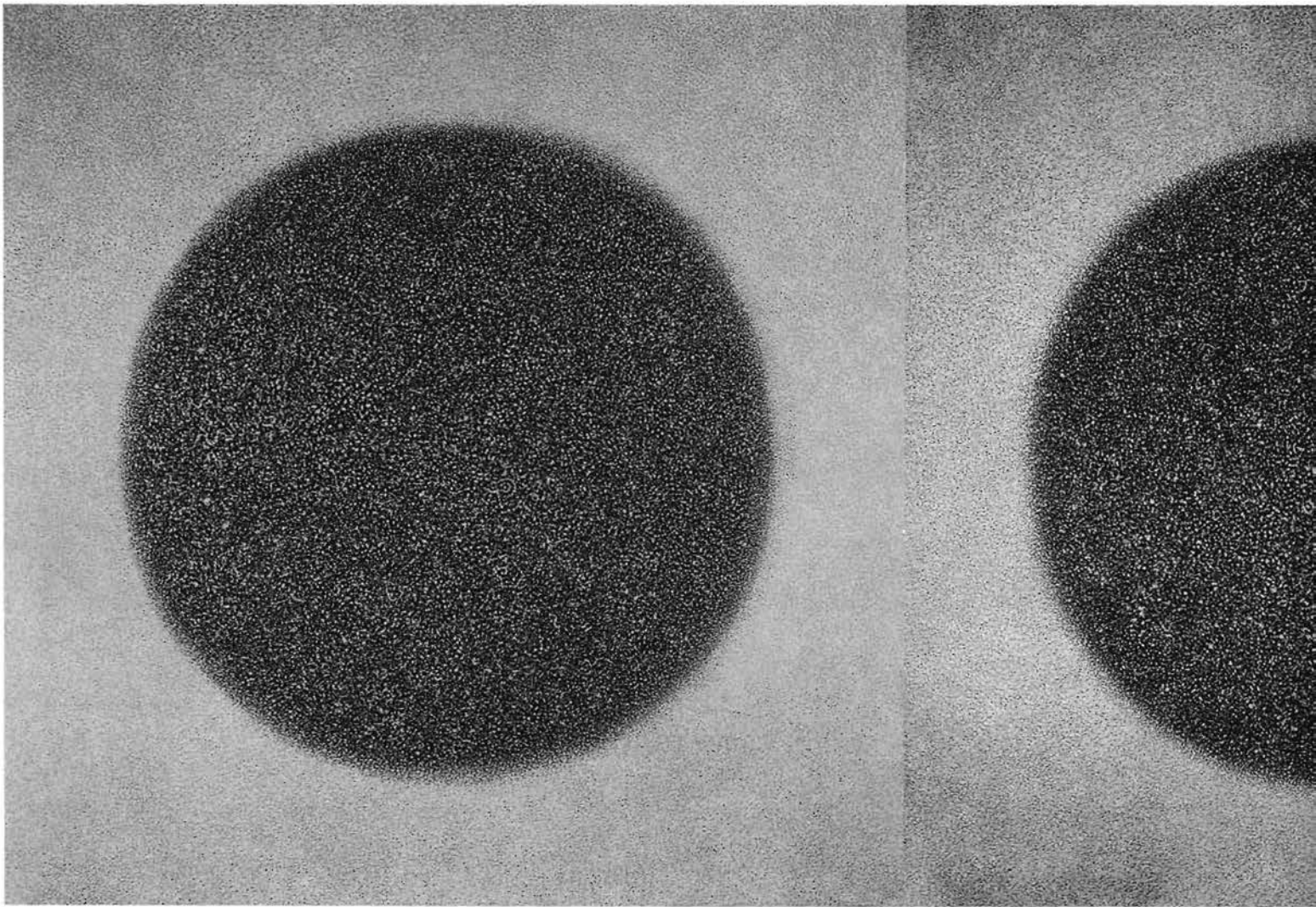


88 *Presence Number 3, Black*, 1969  
Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 80 inches  
Collection of the artist



89 *Radiance*, 1973-74  
Acrylic on linen, 3 panels,  
each 72 x 108 inches  
Collection of the artist

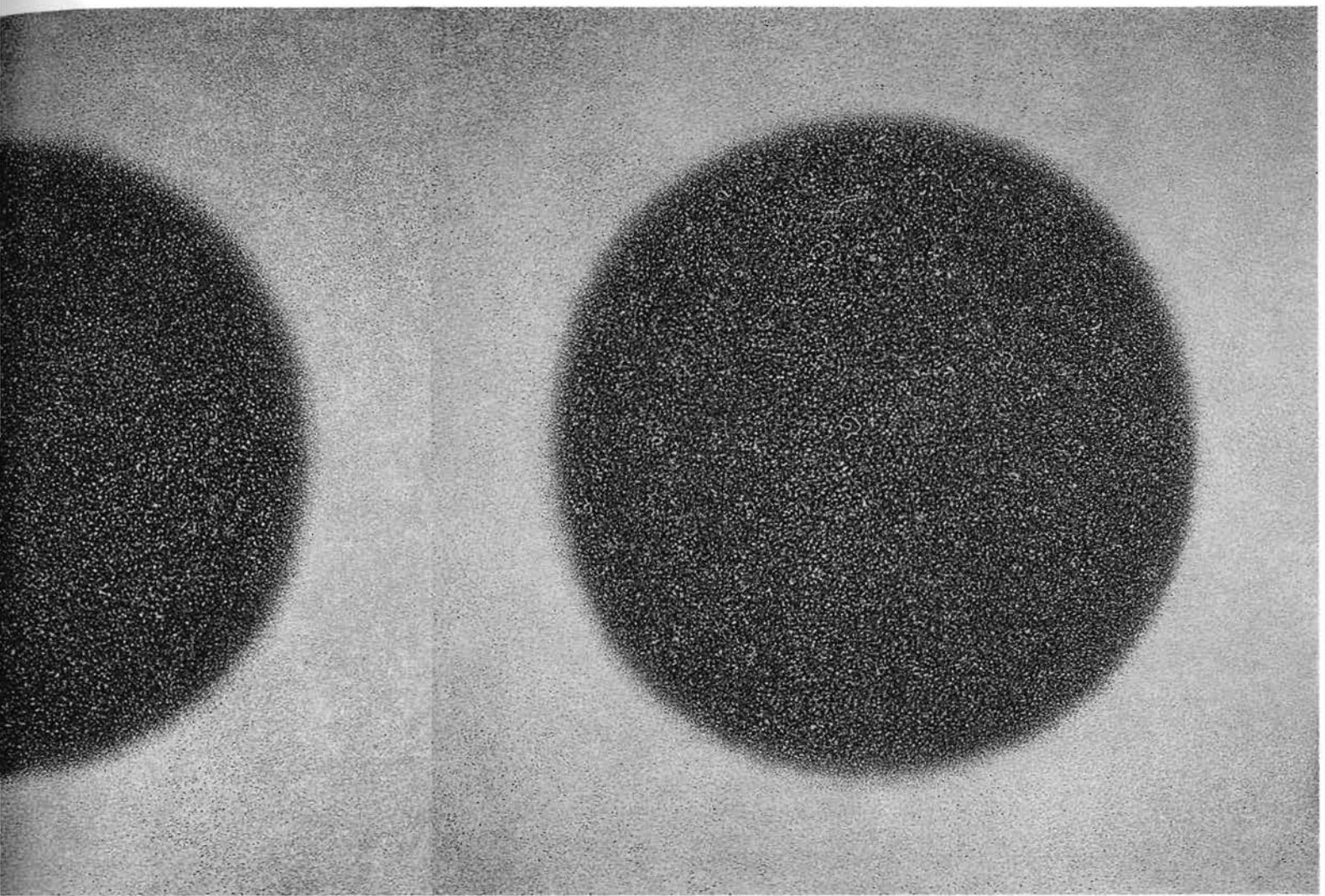




90 *Presence, Healing Circles,*  
1973-74

Acrylic on canvas, 3 panels,  
each 84 x 84 inches

Collection of North Central  
Bronx Hospital, in cooperation  
with New York State Facilities  
and Development Corporation



universe. The critic Lucy Lippard, who in the 1960s organized a traveling exhibition of Pousette-Dart's art, recognized the confluence of outer and inner spaces in such works as *Presence, Healing Circles*. "Images recalling outer space," she wrote, "refer each to inner space. Vastness is implied not only by visual association but by the time element transmitted by the painstaking technique."<sup>45</sup>

Pousette-Dart has lived since the early 1950s within view of the Ramapo Mountains and only a half-hour drive from the Hudson River landscapes that were important to such nineteenth-century painters as Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, so it is not surprising that traces of landscape linger in his inscapes. After his first full-fledged investigation of cosmic images in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he began to mix metaphors, so to speak, and allow elements of landscape to invade cosmic realms. Among his most poetic insights is *Presence, Ramapo Horizon*, 1975 (106), which refers to abstract aspects of the mountains as well as a transparent moon. The small daubs of paint that compose the mountains and moon suggest that a unitary life force constitutes nature. The subtle, diffused light of this painting is particularly haunting, and it recurs in a slightly different form in *Sky Presence, Circle* of the same year (91).

Like a number of artists of this period who felt a need to reduce their art to its barest essentials, Pousette-Dart began to think of ways his ideas could be conceived in black and white. "I've gone to black and white," he later recounted to critic Martica Sawin, "because of my need for a kind of intensity, the most intense light and the most intense darkness and the instantaneous balance between opposites. We can't have wholeness without both. There is nothing there and everything."<sup>46</sup> Starting with *Imploding Light Number 2* and *Presence Number 3, Black*, this current in his work gained momentum in the late 1970s and resulted in the exhibition *Presences: Black and White, 1978-1980*, which was installed at the Marisa del Re Gallery in New York. Among the most forceful and enigmatic pieces in the exhibition were *White Circle, Time* (42) and *Black Circle, Time* (39), which represent a further development of the transparent moon shape in *Presence, Ramapo Horizon*. The works are remarkable for the ways in which texture helps to create illusions of color. In *Black Circle, Time* roughly textured whites which reflect light contrast with the soft, velvety blacks of the circle, which absorbs light and appears as a magical hovering form. Here white and black cease to be opposites and become distinct modes of feeling. A similar though less dramatic illusion is operative in *White Circle,*

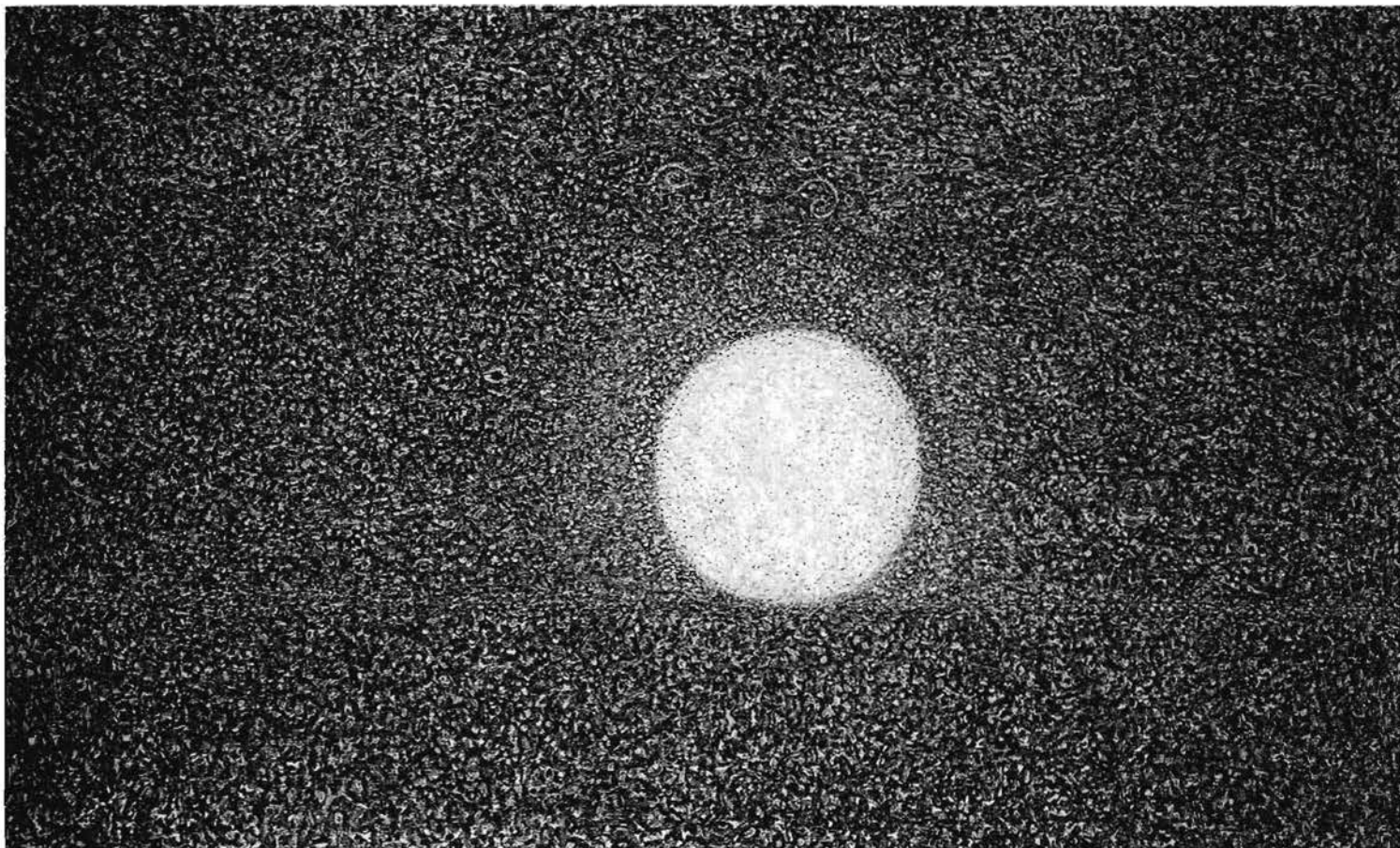
*Time*, in which a white ring appears to glow. (In addition to these large-scale works, the artist made a number of powerful black and white studies on paper, such as *Black and White Landscape*, 1979 (92), *Night Voyage*, 1979 (93), and *Black Quartet*, 1978 (94), which were not shown to the public.)

These black and white paintings depend on ideas formed in the late 1930s and 1940s when the artist was confronting for the first time the contradictions inherent in life and the need to affirm positive aspects of reality. In the years 1938-39 he described his disenchantment with the streamlined, industrial look that characterized late Art Deco and early Moderne, as well as with the geometric abstraction practiced by members of the American Abstract Artists group. His outline of the creative forms of interest to him could serve as a description of *White Circle, Time* and *Black Circle, Time*:

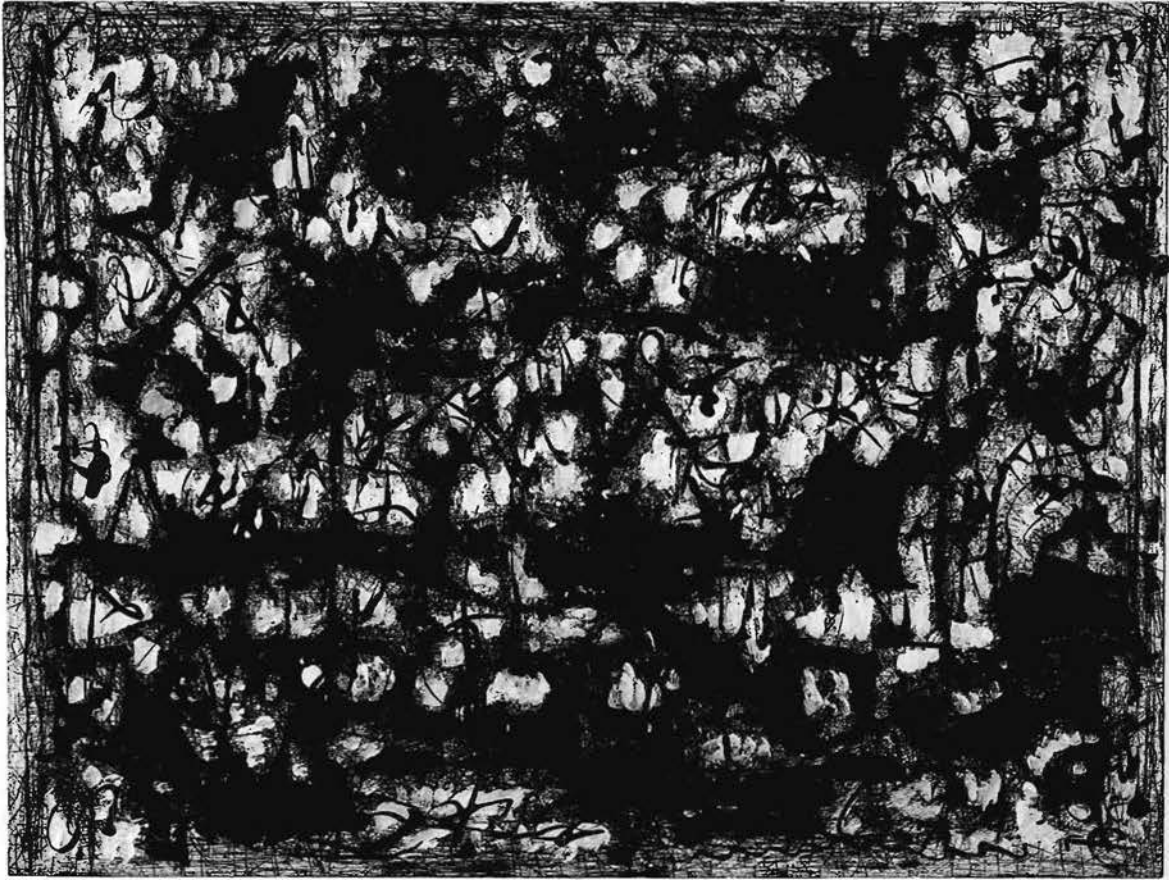
*I do not like what are called  
machine forms  
I like creative forms  
which realize  
a certain geometric quality  
whose ideal is the sphere  
forms with the eternal  
meaning  
movements of  
the circle  
the pyramid  
the sphere<sup>47</sup>*

In other words, the artist goes beyond the decorative appeal of Art Deco and Moderne and creates majestic geometric icons that transcend any one orthodoxy as they come to represent a general belief in harmony, radiance, fullness, and completion.

After the exhibition of black and white paintings, Pousette-Dart took a different turn in his art. He began to synthesize a number of currents in his work by relying on his early interest in sculpture and creating heavily impastoed pieces that are essentially painted reliefs. In these paintings he combines his highly complex imagery of the 1940s, brighter palette of the 1950s, and Impressionistic brush strokes of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and he synthesizes images important to each of these three periods. Christian symbols seen in the early *Crucifixion, Comprehension of the Atom*, 1944 (11), for example, recur in *Illumination Cross*, 1982-83, which was originally part of a four-part series (95, 96). In both works biomorphic images in conjunc-

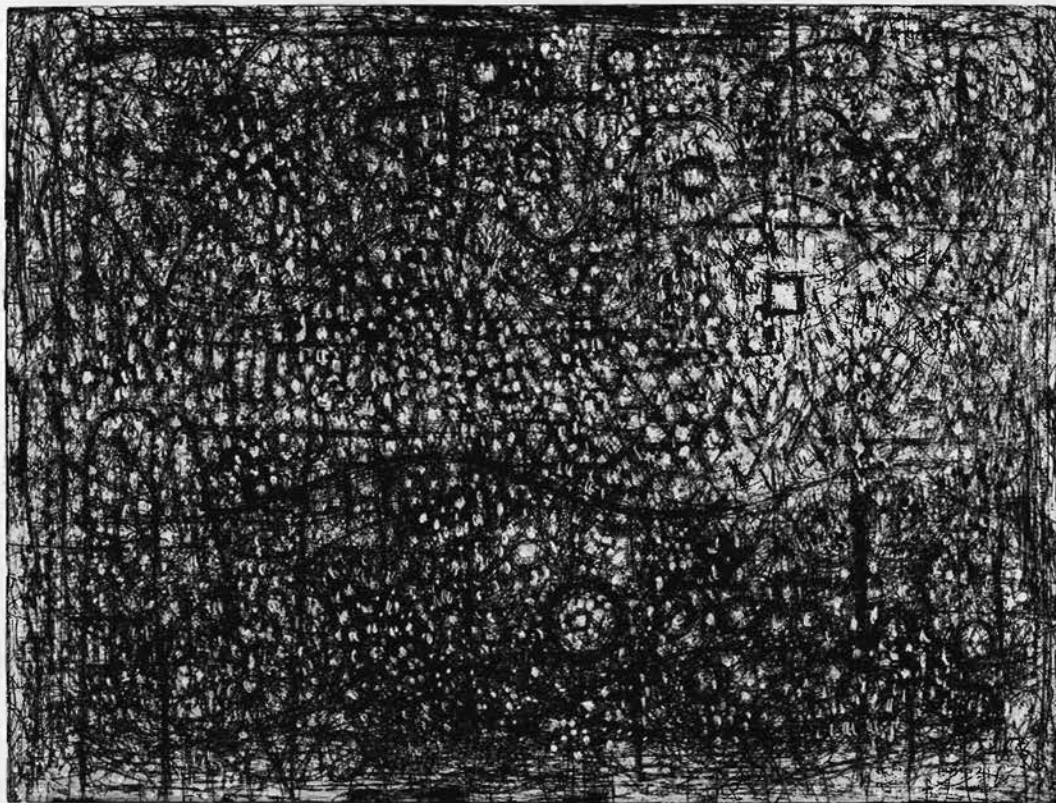


91 *Sky Presence, Circle*, 1963  
Oil on canvas, 43 x 71 inches  
Collection of the artist



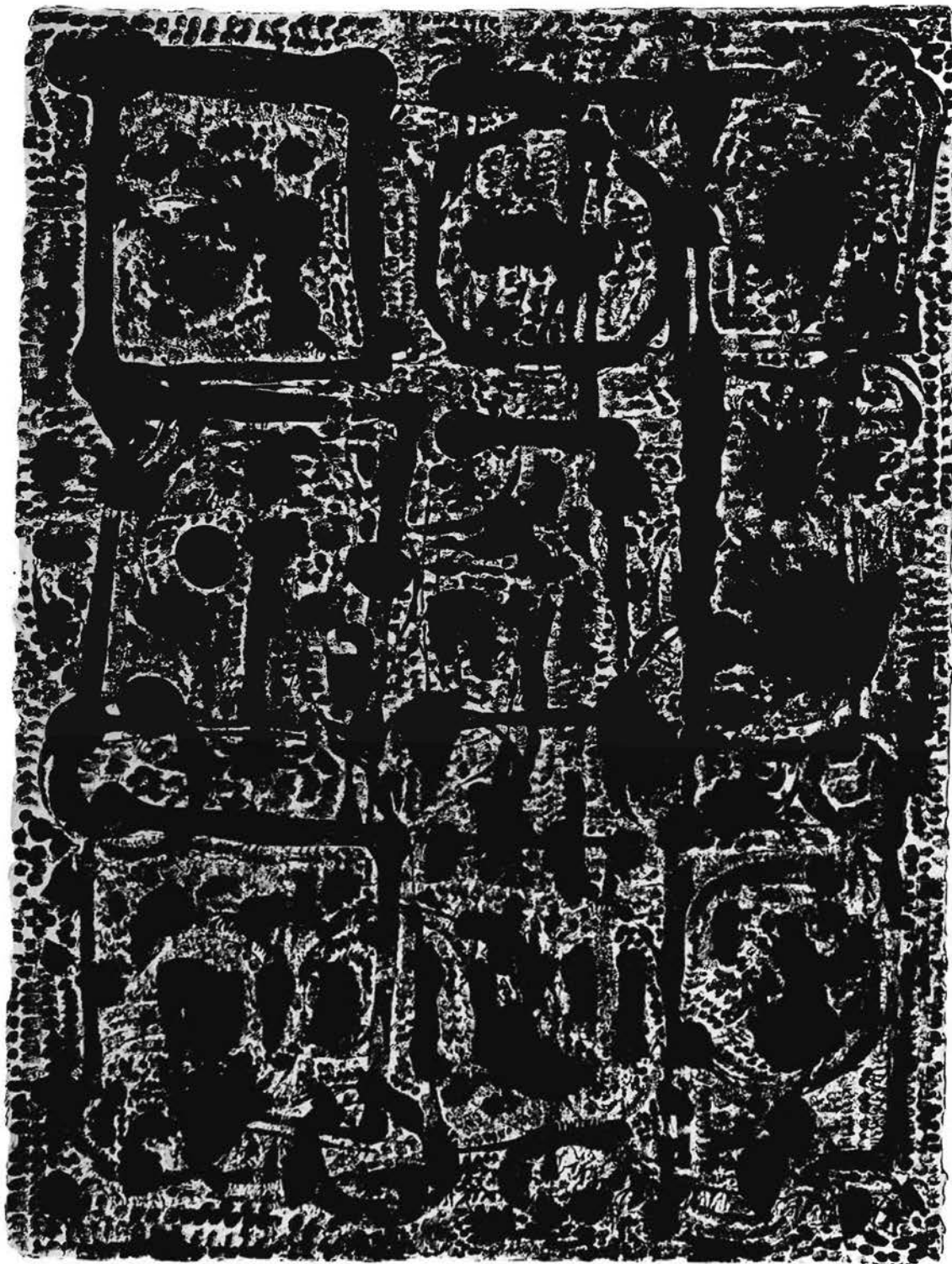
92 *Black and White Landscape*,  
October 1979  
Etching, third-state proof,  
charbriquette and acrylic on  
German etching paper,  
18 x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches  
Collection of the artist





93 *Night Voyage*, July 1979  
Etching, first-state proof, black  
charcoal on German etching  
paper, 17 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 23 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Collection of the artist

94 *Black Quartet*, August 1978  
Acrylic on handmade paper,  
30 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$  inches  
Collection of the artist



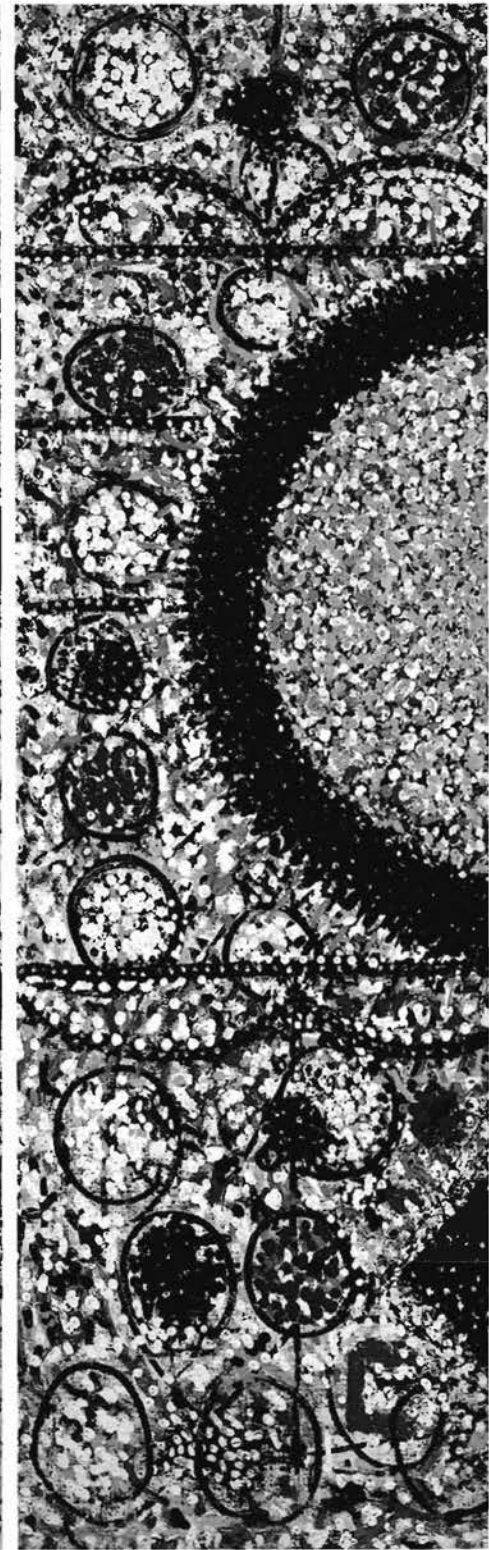
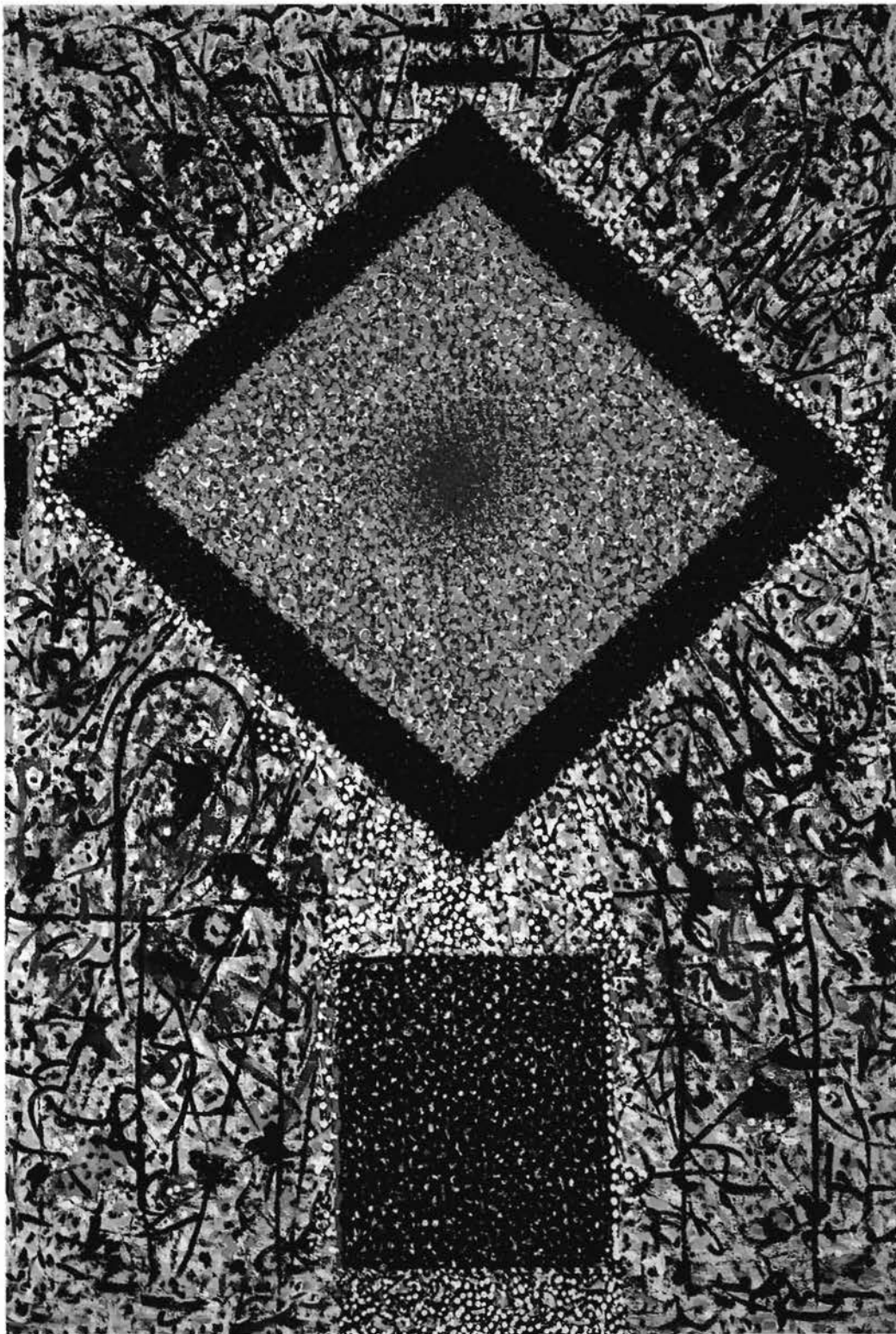
tion with religious symbols point to the fecundity of the unconscious, the modern font of wisdom and seat of the soul. But in *Illumination Cross* there is a greater reliance on abstraction, notable particularly in the cross, which serves as an emblem and also a means to organize the composition as a spiritually derived set of mullions.

Among the most complex of these recent works is the highly symbolic triptych *Time is the Mind of Space, Space is the Body of Time*, 1979–82 (95), which joins biomorphic shapes and astral forms to a boldly geometric diamond, circle, and triangle. This group is executed, as is *Illumination Cross*, in daubs of paint that resemble the small bits of colored stones making up Early Christian and Byzantine mosaics. In recent years Pousette-Dart has continued to investigate the aesthetic possibilities of this synthesis of more than fifty years of creativity in works that vary from *A Child's Room I*, 1986 (97), which contains plastic children's toys embedded in paint, to *Alizarin Time, River*, 1988 (98), a tonalist work incorporating a range of radiating symbols and images that go back to the 1940s.

This essay began with a comparison between the neoplatonic universals that are readily understood in Michelangelo's Adam and the more difficult veiled images of Pousette-Dart's work. If, on close inspection, Pousette-Dart's conflated images can be categorized as fecund signs of the unknown within, one might wonder if he is truly creating images of the void or simply approximating it. The answer of course is that he approximates the void in his art in

order to make it intelligible to people. At some level art must always be an intelligible form of symbolic discourse, even if the discourse is raised from simple illusionism to a categorical confrontation with the unknown.

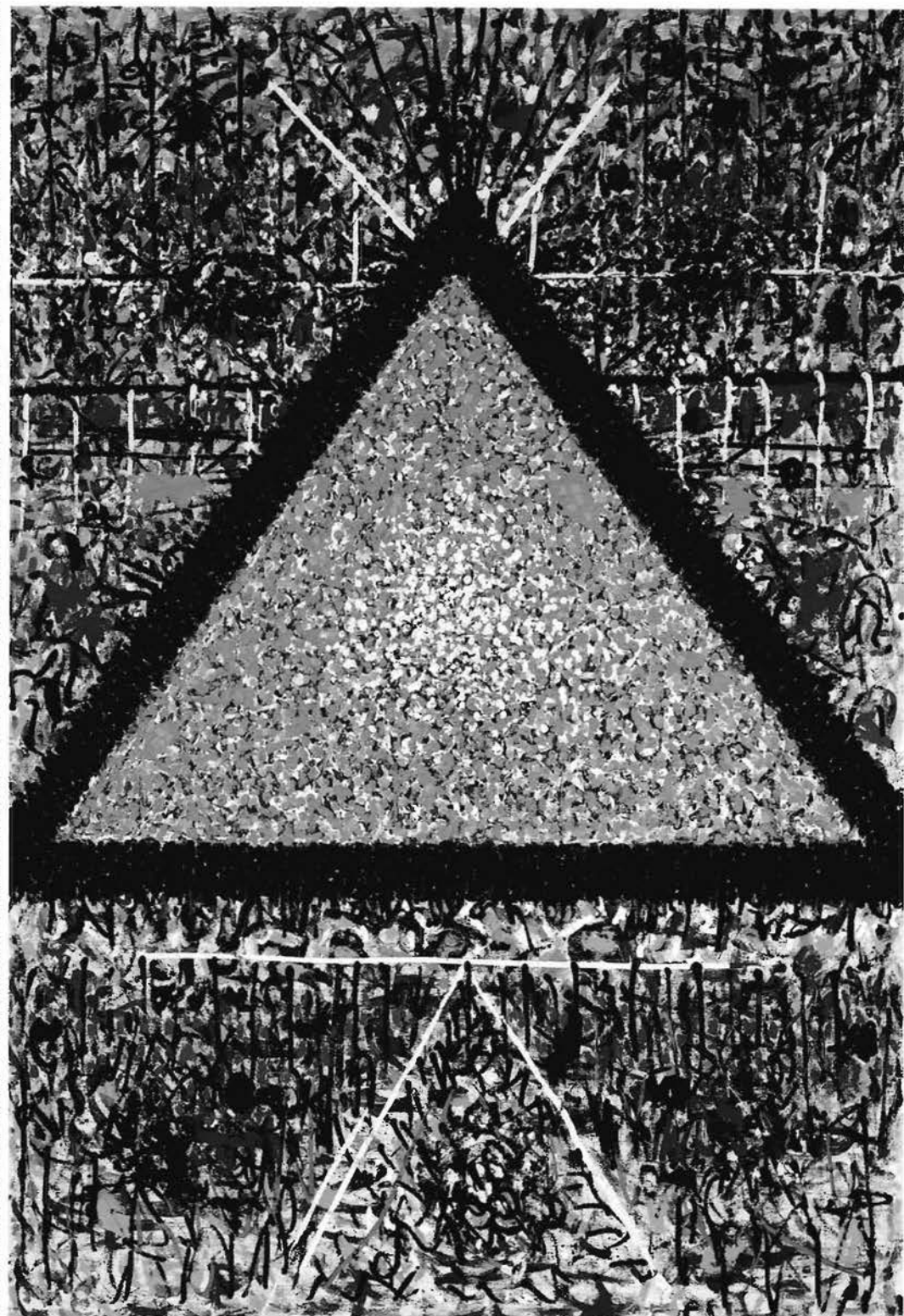
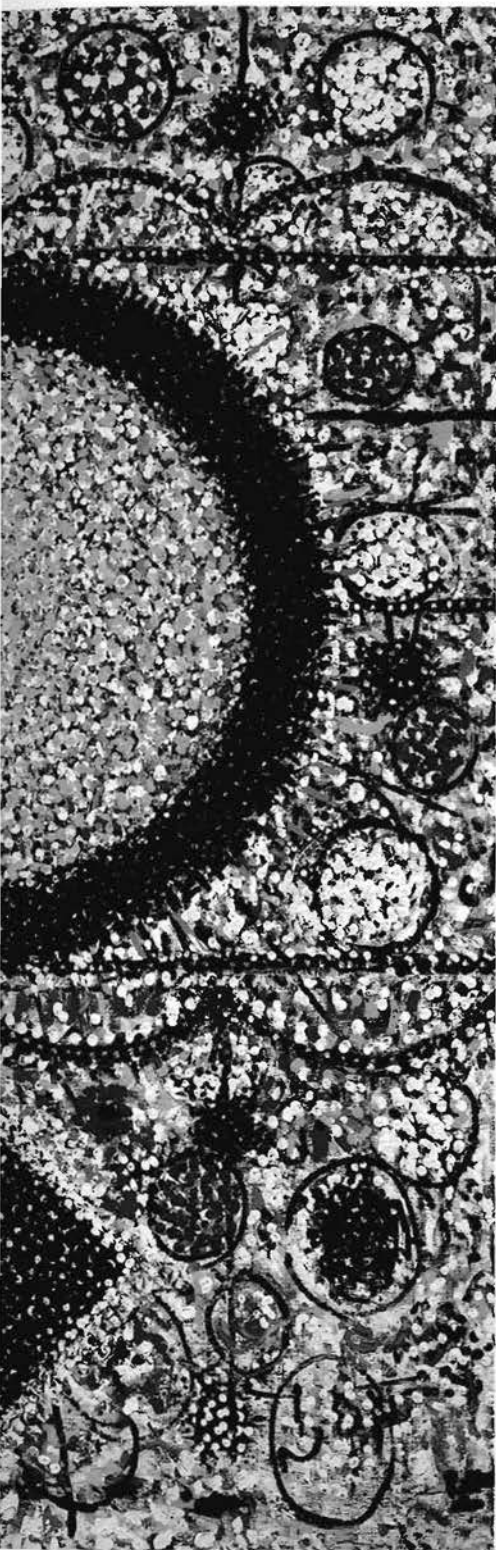
In recent years scientists and mathematicians have begun to reevaluate their attempts to find an underlying set of rules ordering the universe and to look at how the world defies simple categories and consistently verifiable laws. They have begun to accept the idea that chaos or unpredictable deviance is part of nature. While their ideas do not exactly dovetail with Pousette-Dart's understanding of the shadows troubling individuals undergoing emotional and intellectual growth, the two attitudes do serve to revise the once generally accepted notion of a simple, easily understood, and rational universe. Both the scientific and artistic attitudes toward unpredictable deviance are important theories that can help people accommodate themselves to a largely indeterminate world of accelerating change. Pousette-Dart's art serves the important function of abstracting disorder in terms of the metaphorical void within, giving it an aesthetic and provocative conformation, and providing a way for viewers to come to terms with segments of it. His art represents an effort to get back to basics, or as he has succinctly stated, it is an attempt to "express the spiritual nature of the universe."



95 *Time is the Mind of Space,  
Space is the Body of Time,*  
1979-82

Acrylic on linen, 3 panels, each  
89½ x 62½ inches

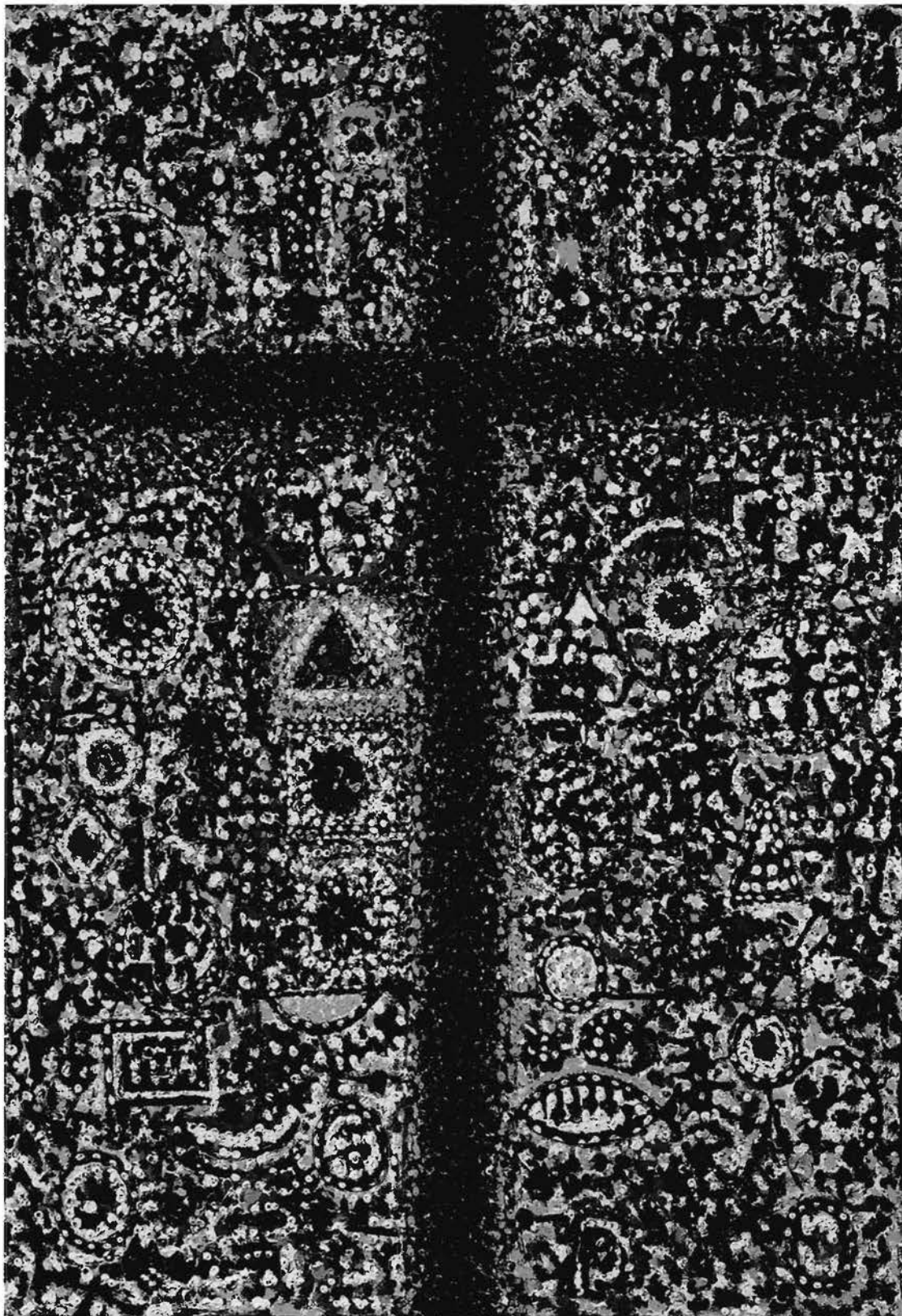
Collection of the artist

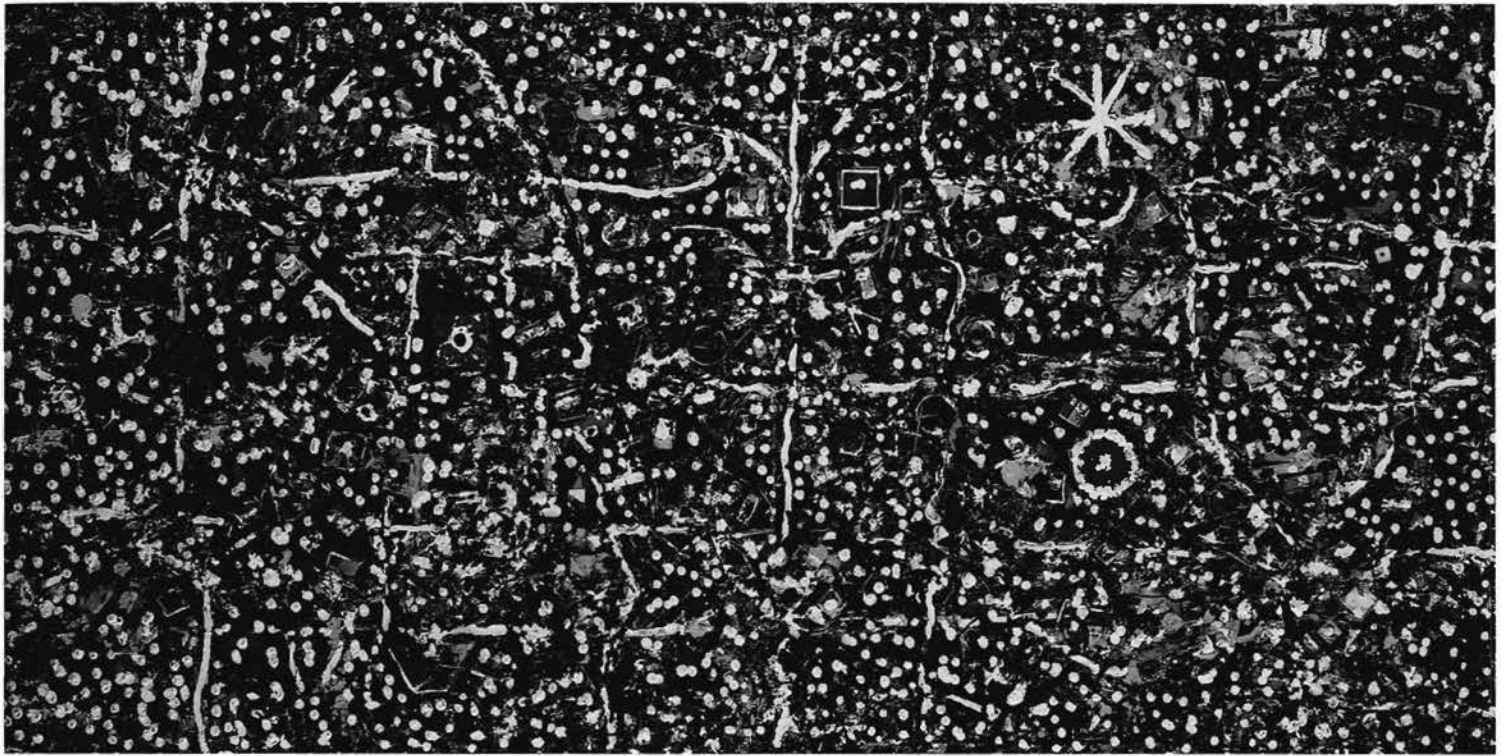


96 *Illumination Cross*, 1982–83

Acrylic on linen,  
89½ x 62½ inches

Collection of the artist





97 *A Child's Room I*, 1986  
Acrylic and mixed media on  
linen, 40 x 80 inches  
Private Collection



98 *Alizarin Time, River*, 1988  
Acrylic on canvas, 2 panels,  
each 72 x 72 inches  
Collection of the artist





1. Quoted in Judith Higgins, "Pousette-Dart's Windows into the Unknowing," *Art News* (January 1987), p. 112. This article is adapted from Higgins's essay "To the Point of Vision: Profile of Richard Pousette-Dart" in *Transcending Abstraction: Richard Pousette-Dart Paintings 1939-85* (Fort Lauderdale: Museum of Art, 1986).
2. Quoted in Martica Sawin, "Transcending Shape: Richard Pousette-Dart," *Arts Magazine* 49 (November 1974), p. 59. Sawin has written several important articles and reviews of Pousette-Dart's work. Her works are excellent sources of quotations by the artist, as is Gail Levin's essay "Pousette-Dart's Emergence as an Abstract Expressionist," *Arts Magazine* (March 1980), pp. 125-29, which succinctly summarizes a vast amount of information.
3. Notebook, 1988.
4. Notebook, 1937-38.
5. Notebook, ca. 1946-50.
6. Notebook LA-8, ca. 1940.
7. Notebook 19, ca. 1946-50.
8. Lecture given at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1951, p. 2. The typescript of this talk is located in the artist's archives. A copy of the typescript is also on deposit in the library of The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
9. Quoted in Higgins, "Pousette-Dart's Windows," p. 115.
10. Mircea Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad, 1985), p. 6.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Notebook, ca. late 1930s-early 1940s.
15. Notebook, May 1940.
16. Notebook LA-10, 1940.
17. Lecture given at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, p. 4.
18. Notebook, ca. late 1930s-early 1940s.
19. Notebook 11, ca. 1970s.
20. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* (December 1952), pp. 34-36, 55-56.

21. Notebook 18, ca. 1946-56. Many of the sections in this notebook reveal an interest in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, such as the following:

*of myself I sing, yes, but not  
of myself myself  
of myself I sing what everywhere  
else I find  
of what in myself I find within  
every other one.*

This connection with Whitman's poetry is only part of this artist's intense involvement with literary and artistic traditions, which are usually invoked and not directly cited in his writings or in his art.

22. Pousette-Dart's attitude toward creation has affinities with the philosophy of the American pragmatist John Dewey, whose well-known book *Art as Experience* emphasizes the type of knowledge to be gained from the process of making art. His ideas were important to many Abstract Expressionists, and they were significant as well for Richard's father, Nathaniel, an expert in many fields, including painting, advertising, and editing. Nathaniel refers to Dewey's ideas a number of times in his journal *Art and Artists of Today*, which was published from March 1937 to June-July 1938. In the February-March 1938 issue, in an essay entitled "The Editor Looks at Art and Artists" and under the subheading "Life as Experience," Nathaniel writes (p.3):

*Our policy is based on John Dewey's philosophy—that art must spring from experience, that the artist must abstract the wisdom of the past and of the present and amalgamate them in the white heat of his individual creativeness. The subconscious is the fountain head from which inspiration wells up to create an art that is alive, rich and mysterious. The false mystery of the esoteric, with its only one-of-this-ness, is the sign of aesthetic snobbery.*

While the father cannot speak for the son, Nathaniel's interest in Dewey and the subconscious appears to be more characteristic of Richard's art than his own. He may well have been influenced at this time by Richard's investigations, particularly since he was close to his son. It is worth noting also that the conjunction of process and the subconscious were important for Flora Pousette-Dart's poetry, even though she slowed the process to the point of patiently waiting for inspiration.

23. Richard Pousette-Dart's layering of images may have also had a source in the many versions of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which were documented in a series of photographs published in Christian Zervos's *Cahiers d'Art* (12:4-5, 1937), a publication read by many American artists. Studies for *Guernica* were also on view at the Valentine Gallery, New York, May 1939.

24. Notebook, ca. 1946.

25. Notebook, 1969.

26. Richard Pousette-Dart, letter to Flora Pousette-Dart regarding John Graham's *System and Dialectics of Art*, ca. late 1930s. Letter is in the artist's archives. Because Pousette-Dart declares his independence from Graham in this letter, it is worth citing in its entirety:

*I admire Graham's book—but I am so aware of the destructive play of any dogmatism—yet perhaps one must be near that firm to approach a concrete achievement—*

*I do think there has been much done in art but am not sure there is as much yet to do*

*I think it must always be so*

*I see Graham talks a good bit to justify his own particular and personal circumstance in life—I have done the same—always I have been aware of this fact when doing it—I have no wish for that kind of thing—I shall truly strive for an impersonal truth—but how we all are tempted to justify our easy desires of one thing I am sure there is no certainty—only a momentary conviction and any too rational artistic philosophy will breed  
no true art  
the greatest creators will not be those to understand  
most thoroughly their creations—  
innovators and inventors are not of this true breath of creation  
analysis has more to do with invention than with creation  
there is no such thing in art!  
a pure form—  
and my philosophy of balance  
between abstraction & nature  
is superior to Graham's dogmatism  
& denunciation  
my philosophy places the significance of art according to its balance of nature and abstraction & intensity  
there by placing every work in a just position  
while Graham denounced all but one faction*

27. Notebook, LA-12, Book of GOD, ca. 1940.

28. Flora Pousette-Dart, *I Saw Time Open* (New York: Island Press, 1947), p. 7.

29. Notebook 22, ca. late 1930s–early 1940s.

30. Notebook 21, ca. 1946–50.

31. *Ibid.* This quotation is a transposition of 1 Corinthians 13:12:  
“For now we see as through thus a simply (or darkly) lit glass, but then face to face—I shall then know even as I am known.”

32. Notebook LA-8, ca. 1940.

33. Quoted in Sawin, “Transcending Shape,” p. 58.

34. Notebook 22, ca. late 1930s–early 1940s.

35. Notebook LA-8, ca. 1940.

36. Notebook, ca. 1937–38.

37. Lecture at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1951, p. 4.

38. Notebook, ca. early 1940s.
39. Quoted in Martica Sawin, “Pousette-Dart’s New Work in Black and White,” *Arts Magazine* 56 (October 1981), p. 156.
40. The term “inscape,” coined by the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins in his journals, was used by Roberto Matta Echaurren in the 1940s when he was living in New York. Robert Motherwell, conversation with the author, Greenwich, Connecticut, November 14, 1975.
41. Notebook, ca. 1954.
42. Statement in John I. H. Baur, *Nature in Abstraction: The Relation of Abstract Painting and Sculpture to Nature in Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1958), p. 79. This book was published in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art in conjunction with an exhibition.
43. For a fuller treatment of the role of peripheral vision in Abstract Expressionist painting, see Robert C. Hobbs, “Early Abstract Expressionism: A Concern with the Unknown Within,” in Robert C. Hobbs and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981). First published in 1978 in conjunction with a traveling exhibition organized by the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
44. Quoted in Higgins, “Pousette-Dart’s Windows,” p. 114.
45. Lucy Lippard, “Richard Pousette-Dart: Toward an Invisible Center,” *Artforum* (January 1975), p. 53.
46. Quoted in Sawin, “Pousette-Dart’s New Work in Black and White,” p. 154.
47. Notebook, ca. 1938–39.